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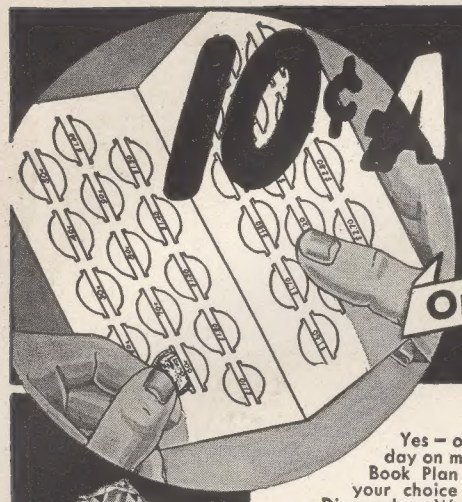

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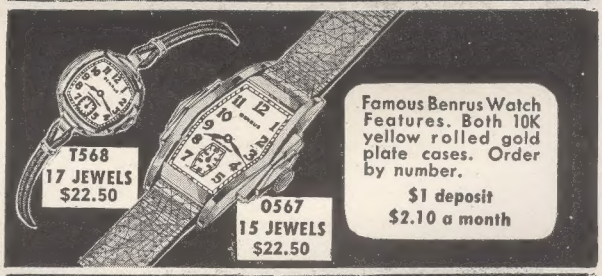

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Frontier Stories

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APACHE SCALP HUNT

A Stirring Novel of Pioneer Courage

By BENNETT FOSTER

Branded coward and liar in frontier eyes, Warr Dashiel raged into the Apache trap to save the girl he loved—and the man he hated.

From the east, silhouetted against the sunrise, came specters, great gaunt, humped shapes —unbelievable apparitions in the Arizona desert

WARR DASHIEL, giving to the wave-like rise and fall of Madhi's rolling gait, saw the little column of smoke against the western sky and realized that Fort Defiance was close. The dromedary also seemed to sense the end of the day's journey for she lengthened her stride, and beside Warr, Hadji Ali grinned all across his face and tapped his mount with his camel stick. Behind the two dromedaries the twelve camels rocked along, each loaded with four hundred pounds of baggage, and behind the camels, well away from them, Bill Peck and

Havasu Simms followed with the mule train.

Warr was pleased that they would reach the fort before nightfall. Horses and mules are afraid of camels, particularly at dusk or after dark, and he would now be able to picket his charges while there was still light, well away from the horse lines. Too, he could report his arrival to his commander, Beale, and so relieve his shoulders of responsibility. Not that Warr Dashiel shunned responsibility. No Naval officer can rise in the service unless responsibility is his constant companion, and Warr Dashiel had once held the right to sign "Lieutenant, U.S.N.," after his name. But this was new country and a new mission, and its completion would be good. Dashiel had brought these twelve camels and the two dromedaries across country suffering no loss save the desertion of the Syrian camel drivers. Of these only Hadji Ali remained. It seemed to Warr, tapping Madhi's neck with his camel stick, that the experiment of Secretary of War, Jeff Davis, was at least being given a fair trial.

From the fort a little party of horsemen appeared, riding across the plain. Appraised of their approach by a sentry, Beale and others were coming out to welcome them. As camels and horses neared, the riders from the fort experienced difficulties. Their mounts plunged and reared, one bolting in a panic at these strange beasts that came along so steadily. The camels, contemptuously indifferent to the disturbance they created, moved sedately across the flats, and the men from the fort, giving up their attempt to join the train, stopped their horses.

Warr spoke to Hadji Ali. "Halt here. I'll go to them."

Halting Madhi, Warr caused her to kneel and slid stiffly down from his perch. Advancing afoot he reached the party from the fort and, seeing Beale's bearded face, saluted the Naval officer. Beale's beard split in a smile as he returned the salute.

"Reporting, sir," Warr Dashiel said. "We are eight days from Santa Fe. We were delayed because the mules could not keep up."

Beale was silent for an instant and then asked: "The rest of your party, Mr. Dashiel?"

"In the rear under the command of Cox'un Peck, sir."

Beale nodded. "You have had no trouble on the way?"

"None, sir. Except that the Syrian camel drivers refused to come further than Santa Fe. I have only one Syrian left, Hadji Ali."

Momentarily a frown crossed Beale's face. He turned to the blue-uniformed men with him. "My second in command," he said. "Mr. Dashiel: Colonel Cragie, Captain Yoe, Lieutenant Perry."

Warr shook hands with two of the Army men. Cragie was broad and squat, with a great gray beard. Captain Yoe was thin, with a hawk face turned brown by constant exposure to wind and sun. Warr Dashiel did not shake Perry's hand, but bowed formally, aware of the dust that stained his clothing, and of his clothing, and of his weariness.

"Your servant, gentlemen," he said.

"And now"—Beale smiled again—"it seems that we are unable to bring our horses closer to the train, Mr. Dashiel. You have had this trouble before?"

"All across the country, sir," Warr answered. "Even the mules of our train won't approach the camels, and we are forced to make separate camps and picket lines. I would suggest that we be given a place near by the fort but not near the horse lines."

"You can camp at the north picket," Cragie's voice rasped. "Mr. Perry will conduct you."

Beale nodded. "You will make a complete report after you have pitched camp."

Cragie mounted, as did Beale and Captain Yoe. They rode off toward the fort behind which the sun burned red. Walter Perry and Warr Dashiel faced each other.

THERE was more than a dislike between the two men who had known each other in years past; there was an active animosity. Perry's voice was curt. "I'll conduct you to the north picket post, Dashiel."

"I'll follow," Warr said quietly, "whenever you're ready, Mr. Perry. The mule train is in sight now and they'll come along." Turning, he walked back to the waiting camels. It was odd, he thought, a queer and exasperating coincidence that

in the middle of this vast wasteland he should meet and be thrown in contact with the one man he hated, the one man that was his sworn enemy. Madhi lumbered up to her feet and Warr turned her to follow the horseman. A man took orders, he thought glumly; a man obeyed his superiors up to a certain point. But if Beale expected him to be friendly with Walter Perry. . . . He left the thought unfinished as Madhi strode along.

The camels were picketed and a campfire glowed by the time the mules arrived. Bill Peck, square as the mainsail of a ship, and Havasu Simms, battered by thirty years of the frontier, joined Warr Dashiel at the fire and made their report. Warr listened, hiding as he always did, his grin at the incongruity of Peck. Bill Peck who had been a ship's boy at ten and was now retired, did not belong among these plains and mountains. If ever a deep-water man lived, that man was Bill Peck.

"Snug alow an' aloft, sir," Bill growled in his deep voice. "An' the watch set."

"Very well, Cox'un," Warr answered as always. "You'll go with me when I report to Mr. Beale."

"Aye aye, sir."

Havasu's high pitched voice took up his perennial complaint. "We had trouble picketin' the mules, Warr. Them dang' camels stink, they do." Every night for sixty nights Warr Dashiel had heard Havasu make that statement.

"You'll go with me, too, Havasu," Warr said. "Are you ready?"

"I ain't et," Havasu answered. "Do we go before we eat?"

"Mess c'n wait," Peck growled. "We'll report aboard."

They left the fire where now the cook was busy, and the mule drivers and those hardy souls who handled the camels were lounging. Out by the camel line Hadji Ali was crooning some old Eastern song, and Warr, listening, thought of the loneliness of that small man, and of the miles of land and water that stretched between him and his home. The sand was soft underfoot and the challenge of the sentry at Fort Defiance's north gate was hard and grating and, somehow, welcome. They passed through the gate, following the sentry's directions as they crossed the parade ground. Lights burned in barracks and officers' quarters, and voices murmured.

"*They're* a eatin'," Havasu grumbled, and Bill Peck snarled: "Pipe down!"

Rounding the end of a building, his companions half a step behind, Warr stopped short. There was a flurry of movement and the rustle of silk, then a girl's voice exclaimed: "Warr! . . . Mr. Dashiel!"

IN the light from a window Warr could see her, smooth cheeks flushed, eyes bright, hair gleaming in its smooth coil upon her neck.

"Nancy!" he exclaimed, and then, more formally, "Miss Fernal."

"Mr. Beale said that you'd arrived." The girl had regained her poise. "I had no idea I would see you tonight. I was just crossing to Captain Yoe's quarters."

Warr's head bowed, his smooth hair, long now from lack of barbering, shining in the light. "And that was my good fortune," he said gravely. "We are on our way to report to Mr. Beale. May I hope to see you when that duty is finished?" The words were stilted but there was an eagerness in them that caused Havasu to jerk his elbow into Bill Peck's ribs. The coxswain grunted.

"Father and I are staying with Major Kennedy," Nancy Fernal answered smoothly. "The second house in officers' row. We'd be delighted to see you." She smiled flashingly then went on along the path. For a moment Warr stood, unmoving, watching her progress.

"The commander's waitin', Mr. Dashiel," Bill Peck reminded.

With a start Warr lifted his head and, turning, went on toward the black bulk of the headquarters building.

In the colonel's office, Cragie, Beale, and hawkfaced Yoe listened impassively to Warr's report. When he had finished Beale spoke. "You will, of course, reduce this to writing, Mr. Dashiel. At your first opportunity. Colonel, if you have nothing further, I'm sure that Mr. Dashiel will appreciate the opportunity to refresh himself." He waited expectantly.

Cragie nodded. "We're glad that you arrived safely, Mr. Dashiel," he rumbled. "It's not always so easy, coming across

from Santa Fe. Mr. Beale, I'll expect you gentlemen to dinner at my quarters tomorrow night." The colonel arose, as did Yoe, and Warr recognized that the interview was finished. Beale put his hand on Warr's shoulder and said, "Thank you, Colonel. It will be a pleasure." They went out into the corridor together and found Havasu and Bill Peck waiting beside Cragie's orderly.

"A little different from what you're used to, Cox'un?" Beale asked, pausing beside Peck.

Bill Peck grunted, "Any port does for a sailor, Cap'n."

"You can go back to camp, Havasu," Warr said. "There's nothing more to do tonight."

"Good!" Havasu said thankfully. "Come on, Bill." And he padded down the corridor on moccasined feet.

"Good men," Beale said softly.

"Good men," Warr agreed as they followed the seaman and the scout.

BEALE'S quarters were lighted and a meal was in readiness. Clean and refreshed, Warr Dashiel sat across the candle-lit table and watched his commander. Beale, now that they were alone, put aside all formality. He watched Warr slack his healthy appetite, and poured glasses of port when the meal was finished.

"So you lost the camel drivers?" Beale asked as he sipped the wine.

"At Santa Fe," Warr agreed. "They would go no further and I had no way of making them. I pressed men into service to drive the camels. Hadji Ali was in charge."

"And how do you think Mr. Davis's idea will work?" Beale drawled.

"The camels can carry heavy loads," Warr responded. "They go long distances without water. But I don't think that they will solve the problem of desert transportation as the Secretary hopes."

"Why not?"

"Because the men hate them. And because horses and mules will not go near them." Warr was impatient with this talk. He sensed that Beale, too, was impatient, that his commander had something other than camels and camel drivers on his mind. Beale sipped his port, then lowered the glass suddenly.

"Mr. Perry is stationed here," he said. "Warr, I cannot have friction between you two. I will not have it." Warr waited, not speaking. "I know that you feel that you have just cause for disliking Mr. Perry," Beale continued. "He . . ."

"'Just cause!'" Warr snapped. "'Dislike!' You speak too mildly, Mr. Beale!"

Beale held up his hand. "Perhaps I do," he said. "I was in California when Scott landed at Vera Cruz. I have heard of your trouble there. I know that you were courtmartialed and dismissed from the service and that it was Perry who filed the charges against you. But I tell you that this mission means too much to me to have your personal troubles interfere. I knew your father, Warr. He commanded the *Intrepid* when I was midshipman. I loved and respected him and because of him I gave you this place. As your father's friend and yours I ask you to go no further in your quarrel with Mr. Perry."

Warr Dashiel could not answer. He sat, staring at the table.

"I have your promise?" Beale insisted.

"We were supporting the landing," Warr said quickly, his words tumbling out. "I was in charge of the boats. Perry and Captain Black had a troop and were driven back after they landed. Black was killed and Perry was cut off. He claimed that I took the boats out into the harbor and refused to support him. I tell you that we landed and fought all along the beach. It was his own foolhardiness that killed his captain and got his men cut off. We got them clear. And to save his own hide he preferred charges against me. They wouldn't listen, at the courtmartial! They wouldn't hear my witness. Perry's uncle is a senator and I was convicted of cowardice and cashiered out of the service. I challenged him and he refused to fight. He said that he would not fight a cashiered officer and a coward! And there was another reason . . ." Warr Dashiel stopped short. He would not mention Nancy Fernal's name; could not mention it.

Beale was nodding slowly. "I realize how you must feel," he said slowly. "It's unfortunate that Mr. Perry is stationed here. Colonel Cragie has a great deal of confidence in him and he stands high at

the fort. I must insist, Warr"—Beale's voice grew iron hard—"that you do not let your personal feelings interfere with our business. I must have your promise."

Beale waited. After a long minute Warr raised sullen eyes. "You have it," he said reluctantly.

"Good!" Beale got up. "And now I know that you are tired from your trip. I'll not keep you, Warr."

Warr also arose. For a long minute he looked at his commander and then, wordlessly, strode from the room and to his own quarters. There he flung himself down into a chair and remained, eyes fixed upon the floor. Nancy Fernal had said that she and her father were stopping with Major Kennedy, that they would be glad to see Warr Dashiel when his duty permitted. Nancy Fernal . . . Nancy Fernal. . . . The thoughts went around and around in Warr Dashiel's mind, circling endlessly, reaching nowhere. The candles burned low in their sconces, guttering in their own wax. In the next room Edward Beale moved, preparing for rest. His door darkened and his voice called, "Good night, Warr."

"Good night."

Beale's bed creaked. One of the candles on Warr's table sputtered out. The other followed. Darkness filled the room.

In the second house on officers' row a girl got up from a chair and, taking a candlestick, crossed to the door of the living room.

"Good night, Father," she said.

"Good night, Nancy." Dr. Fernal did not look up from his reading. Nancy went on out. After a time the light in her window died.

Out by the camel lines Hadji Ali crooned softly to his charges. A stranger, Hadi Ali, in a strange land. The camels, listening, chewed their cuds contemplatively, rolling them between their jaws.

THE walls of Fort Defiance were topped by a parapet and guard towers which were constantly occupied by sentinels. George Cragie was an old Indian fighter and in this year of 1857, with scarcely more than twelve thousand men to police the vastness of the Western empire, good Indian fighters were at a premium. Cragie walked under the Apache name of "Eyes Always Open" and had earned it honestly.

On this pleasant spring afternoon Warr Dashiel, with Havasu Simms, walked atop the wall, pacing it as once he had paced the quarterdeck of the U. S. Brig *Monon.* Havasu, beard flaring and rifle across his arm as always, kept pace with the younger man, and as he walked, maintained a constant stream of conversation.

"He's a no 'count louse," Havasu proclaimed. "I knowed him back in Missouri. Doniphan wouldn't have no truck with him an' neither would Sterling Price, an' here he is, a sittin' pretty, chief of scouts for Ol' Cragie. Somebody oughter do sumthin' about it!"

Below the wall the object of Havasu's tirade stood talking to Walter Perry. Dutch Metzger, chief of scouts for Fort Defiance, was a wide spread, black bearded man, inclined to corpulence. He did not lift his eyes toward the man on the wall but Perry, almost as though he heard his name called, turned and looked up. A smile swept the lieutenant's handsome face and Warr could have sworn that Perry was taunting him. He turned short and walked back along the wall.

"An' you're the one that's goin' to do sumthin'," Havasu proclaimed. "Yo're goin' to the colonel an' tell him that Dutch is a louse!"

"I'm going to mind my own business!" Warr snapped. "Cragie's scouts aren't included in that."

Havasu sighed. "All I was tryin' to do," he stated reflectively, "was to git outa killin' him. That's all I was tryin' to do. I reckon there ain't no he'p for it, though."

Warr glanced sharply at his companion. There was no doubt that Havasu meant what he said. "You can't do that!" Warr stated. "That would be murder, Havasu!"

"Murder, hell!" Havasu growled. "Lettin' him stay here an' scout is murder. He'll bring the whole durn Apache nation down on this place some day, him an' his scoutin'. It ain't murder to squish a louse, is it?"

"Havasu"—Warr stopped and faced his friend—"you'll have to promise me that you'll leave Metzger alone. I don't know what your quarrel is with him, but I know that Mr. Beale has hired you to

scout for his survey party. We can't put personal likes and dislikes first. We've got to think of our work." Almost word for word Warr repeated his commander.

Havasu rolled a quid thoughtfully from one cheek to the other. "That's so," he drawled. "I reckon yo're right, Warr. There'd be a powerful stink raised iffen I jest up an' kilt Dutch, wouldn't there? Yeah, I reckon I got to let him live." There was honest regret in Havasu's voice.

"You'll have to promise me that you'll not have trouble with Metzger," Warr said firmly.

"I'll promise to let him alone," Havasu answered, "jest as long as he lets me alone. But iffen I ketch him in some of his skullduggery . . ." The scout stopped and left the threat unfinished. Warr was satisfied. He knew Havasu Simms and respected him. Havasu was a plainsman without par and a man of his word. More, in the long marches west, Havasu and Warr Dashiel had come to be friends.

DOWN below the two there was movement, a stir at the gate as the guard appeared. Captain Yoe crossed from Headquarters to the gate and stood there, talking. Then, through the gate, Hadji Ali appeared and behind the Syrian came two men leading camels.

"I told them to bring mules!" Warr snapped, and ran along the parapet. There were certain articles of freight within the fort that Beale had ordered moved to the camp, and Hadji Ali had brought the camels to effect the transfer. Before Warr reached the ladder the camels had created their customary disturbance. A team of mules pulling a wagon along the parade ground, sighted the apparitions and stampeded, braying as they ran, their driver trying vainly to check them. The horses Perry and Metzger stood holding, freed themselves with a jerk of the reins and careened madly away, and from the corner of officers' row a woman screamed. Warr, at the top of the ladder, could see Nancy Fernal, a child clinging to either hand, squarely in the path of the frightened mules and wagon.

A single leap brought him to the ground. Scrambling up he ran across the open space and as the distance narrowed between himself and the young woman, he shouted. "Run, Nancy. Run!"

Try as she might, the frightened children impeded the girl's escape and the wagon was almost upon them. Warr gave a last desperate leap, caught at the girl and the children and they went to the ground together, the mules pounding past and the front wheel of the wagon brushing Warr's leg. For an instant they lay there and then both the children began to scream.

Warr got to his feet and helped Nancy to rise. His face was white with his anxiety and his voice shook as he demanded: "Are you hurt, Nancy? Are you hurt?"

Not heeding the question the girl dropped to her knees and swept the two frightened children into her arms. The mules, blind in their fright, smashed into the guard room by the gate and from all directions men came running.

"Nancy!" Warr knelt beside the girl. "Are you hurt? Tell me!"

"No Warr." Nancy hugged the children to her tightly. "I saw them coming and I couldn't move. And then you shouted and Bud and Cissie . . ." She had time for no more. The first of the running men arrived, and from officers' row a woman, skirts flying, ran toward them, stopped, and snatching the two children from Nancy's arms held them close. Awkwardly Warr got to his feet. He reached down his hand to aid Nancy Fernal but Walter Perry was already lifting her. Perry's face was black with his scowl.

"Get those camels out of here, Dashiel!" he commanded. "Get them out. You've done enough damage with the crazy things!" As he spoke his arm went protectively about the girl and in that instant it seemed to Warr Dashiel that Nancy Fernal welcomed the shelter of Perry's arms, that she swayed into them. Through the clamor that surrounded Warr, Nancy, and the officer, Havasu's raucous voice carried.

"Warr, I cain't make this heathen *sabe*. He'p me make him git these camels outen here!"

For an instant Warr stood poised. He saw the weeping children and their white faced mother, the crowd of soldiers about

him, but more than these he saw Nancy Fernal in Walter Perry's arms. Abruptly, without a word, Warr half turned and, pushing through the crowd of men, walked to where Havasu Simms stood holding Hadji Ali by the collar.

"Take the camels back to camp, Hadji Ali," Warr commanded harshly. "Take them back and send mules for the loads. Go now."

A smile split Hadji Ali's dark face. Warr Dashiel was his friend, his chief. "I go now."

"You'd better come with us, Warr," Havasu said anxiously. "Hi Jolly won't mind nobody but you."

Warr looked back. The group about Nancy was dissolving. He could see Perry and the girl moving toward the officers' houses. "All right," Warr said briefly. "I'll go with you, Havasu."

AT the survey camp beside the little rock house that was used as a picket post for the fort, Warr dispatched men and mules for the freight at the fort. He stayed at the camp until the freight was brought, and then remained, taking a morose pleasure in denying himself a return to the fort. He had seen Nancy Fernal in Perry's arms. Perhaps she liked to be there. Perhaps . . . Warr turned and gave brief orders in answer to Bill Peck's question concerning the disposal of a pack.

All afternoon Warr remained at the camp. He could see men moving back and forth across the open gate, could see the business of the fort as its occupants went about their accustomed ways. No one came to the camp, no one went from the camp to the fort. At sundown, when the colors came floating down and the sunset gun boomed its salute, Warr stood, straight and stiff until the echo of the shot died away.

Shortly after the sunset gun Edward Beale came striding across the space between camp and fort. Instinctively, as their leader approached, the men stopped their talk. Beale, reaching the camp, spoke pleasantly to one or two and, walking in front of the rows of tents, made a cursory and informal inspection. That done, he joined Warr.

"It was a mistake," Beale said curtly, "to send camels to the fort today, Mr. Dashiel. You nearly caused a tragedy."

Warr did not answer. He had not ordered Hadji Ali to bring the camels to the fort, but it was not in him to shift the blame. In Warr Dashiel's code a man stood by a subordinate, regardless. It was Havasu who spoke up.

"Warr didn't send them camels. I heard him tell the orderly that come out, to have 'em bring in mules, Mr. Beale."

Beale glanced from Warr to Havasu, then back again. "Is that true, Mr. Dashiel?" he asked.

"I told the orderly to have mules sent in," Warr answered curtly.

"Then . . ." Beale began. "Peck! Cox'un!"

Bill Peck came running. "Did you send the camels to the fort this afternoon?" Beale demanded sternly.

"Aye aye, sir!" Peck panted with his exertions. "The sojer that come out said particular that Mr. Dashiel wanted camels. I thought it was queer at the time, I did."

Beale scowled. "Now why . . . ?" he said, and then, turning to Warr: "Are you sure you sent for mules?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a moment's silence. Then Beale shrugged. "A misunderstanding," he said. "No matter now. Your prompt action prevented a serious accident, Mr. Dashiel. That was a brave act."

Warr said nothing and Beale turned to Peck. "The camels are not to leave their picket line," he commanded. "Not unless I order it."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And now," Beale turned back to Warr, "Colonel Cragie is expecting us to dinner, Mr. Dashiel. We will just have time to get ready. I understand that the ladies are invited and . . . What's wrong, Mr. Dashiel?"

"Please, sir," Warr apologized, "I'd like to be excused. I'm needed here. I . . ."

"Nonsense!" Beale thrust his hand under Warr's arm. "We can't afford to offend the colonel, Mr. Dashiel. Cox'un! Send a man with Mr. Dashiel's baggage to my quarters. Come along."

All the way to the fort, all during the time he shaved and dressed, Warr dreaded

the prospect of the evening. He knew these post dinners. The food would be game and dry supplies, fairly well cooked, and there would be plenty to drink, before, during and after the meal. But it was not the food nor the drinking that worried Warr. Rather it was the fact that Walter Perry would be present and, infinitely worse, Nancy Fernal and her father, the doctor. But there was no escaping the chore and when Beale called Warr joined him and glumly walked to Cragie's quarters.

All the officers of the fort were assembled there: Cragie, Major Kennedy, Captain Yoe, a quartermaster captain, two or three callow lieutenants. Walter Perry stood talking in a corner with Nancy Fernal. Doctor Fernal, together with the post surgeon of Fort Defiance, was in a group of officers and their wives. Beale and Warr Dashiel bowed over Mrs. Cragie's work-worn hand, and they paid their respects to Major Kennedy's wife and to the wives of the quartermaster and the surgeon. Yoe, bringing a woman forward, stopped in front of Warr.

"May I present Mr. Dashiel, my dear?" he asked formally. "You have said that you wished to thank him."

Warr found himself looking into two blue eyes and recognized the woman who had come running to her children. He bowed low over Mrs. Yoe's hand.

"I owe you more than any greeting, Mr. Dashiel," Mrs. Yoe said. "I owe you thanks for my children. If it had not been for you . . ." She broke off, unable to go further.

"Madam," Warr answered, "please don't. I was near and I did what seemed necessary. I hope that both children are not hurt."

There was a little circle around Warr and Blanche Yoe. From the edge of that circle a voice, soft and yet carrying, spoke three words: "The modest hero!" That was Walter Perry, Warr well knew. He flushed red beneath his even tan.

Mrs. Yoe lifted her head, her cheeks as red as Warr's. "There were others nearer than you," she announced, a ring in her voice. "I saw the whole occurrence. You have presence of mind, Mr. Dashiel, and you are a brave man."

A soldier, awkward and wearing white gloves as though they hurt his hands, entered carrying a tray. Colonel Cragie, glad perhaps of the interruption, announced: "Sherry, ladies and gentlemen. Or there is whisky for those who prefer it." There was a general movement toward the table whereon the tray was placed.

At the table Warr found himself seated beside Mrs. Kennedy. Across from him Perry occupied a chair between Nancy Fernal and her father. The food was good but the conversation was slow. Cragie, a soldier, paid attention to his eating and the courses came and went like troops passing interminably in review. At long last the meal was done. Mrs. Cragie arose. All around the table the men stood up and there was a flurry of conversation as the women left the room.

SETTLED again in their chairs, with cigars and a bottle of port on the table, the men were more at ease. Talk flowed back and forth, most of it concerning Beale and his survey party. There was much discussion as to his proposed route along the thirty-fifth parallel and the crossing of the Colorado River which must be made at Yuma. Warr, not entering the general discussion, spoke to the quartermaster captain beside him and from that worthy received information concerning Fort Defiance and its people. The quartermaster was a male gossip and filled with tattle. Dr. Fernal, the quartermaster said, was awaiting the arrival of a wagon train bound west. The doctor had received orders to report to Fort Yuma to take the place of post surgeon. The wagon train was expected daily.

"Trust Cragie not to waste men," the quartermaster said. "He'll have to send Fernal in an ambulance and with an escort, and he'll kill two birds with one stone. He can cut down the number of the escort and still be safe by sending Fernal with a wagon train."

Cragie, wine glass in hand, stood up at the head of the table. "A toast, gentlemen," he proclaimed. "To Mr. Beale and his survey. May he be successful."

That toast was drunk. Beale, not to be outdone, offered thanks to the officers and men of Fort Defiance and proposed a toast to the colonel. Warr could feel Perry watching him from across the table.

When the toast to Cragie had been downed Perry remained standing, looking at him.

"It seems to me," Perry said, "that the Navy has taken the place of the Army in this venture. Surely the Navy belongs on water and the Army on the land." There was a general laugh when he finished his statement. "However that may be," Perry continued, "let me propose a toast. I say that we should drink to the camels who don't drink at all but who give opportunity for courage to those who sadly need it."

The man was drunk. Warr could see that plainly. But, drunk or sober, he was insulting. Slowly Warr started out of his chair and then, feeling Beale's eyes upon him, sank back again. Perry had lifted his glass and drunk his own toast. Not another man at the table moved. Then Cragie's voice came harshly.

"You are in bad taste, Mr. Perry. Gentlemen, my apologies. Shall we join the ladies?"

A sigh, half of relief, half of disbelief, went up. There was a moving of chairs about the table, then with Cragie leading the way the men left the dining room.

Later, in the living room of the colonel's quarters, Warr could see that the men avoided him. He knew why. He should have immediately resented Perry's imputation of cowardice. That was the code of the time, a requirement for a gentleman. He had let the insult pass and now these others were wondering if Perry was not right. Warr found the Colonel and Mrs. Cragie and, thanking them for their hospitality, pled the necessity of his presence at the survey camp. The colonel was coolly pleasant as he told Warr good night. In the hall, selecting his hat from the hall tree, Warr was ready to go. A voice stopped him.

"Warr."

He turned. Nancy Fernal was at the portieres that curtained the hall from the living room. "I wanted to tell you," Nancy said. "I was not hurt, Warr. And I wanted to thank you for what you did."

Warr bowed. The fury welling up in him could not longer be restrained. "You are quite welcome, Miss Fernal," he answered. "Quite. And I am pleased that you were not hurt."

"Warr."

Again the man turned from the door. "I believe that Mr. Perry is waiting for you," he rasped. "Good night, Miss Fernal."

LIKE every Army post of its period Fort Defiance was blessed with a sutler's store. Situated on the military reservation a quarter mile from the west gate, the store was the headquarters for men off duty. Naturally the store was also a headquarters for gossip. Life on the reservation was confining and both the men and the women of the post found relief from the monotony by talking about their fellows. Havasu Simms, returning to the survey camp from the sutler's store, entered his tent, leaned his rifle against the tent pole and addressed Bill Peck.

"Somebody," Havasu said darkly, "around here is goin' to git killed. I been down to the store an' they're talkin' about Warr. Said he was a coward."

Peck sat up on his bed and looked with round eyes at the scout. "Mr. Dashiel?"

"Warr." Havasu sat down, produced his chunk of black native twist and bit off a generous portion. "I made this feller back down an' crawfish, but it didn't do no good. I'll bet they started talkin' again just as soon as I left."

"Spin the yarn," Peck commanded.

"Happened last night." Havasu spat through the tent door. "At Colonel Cragie's party." With that start he elaborated, giving a somewhat embroidered version of the tale. "It's a damned lie," he completed. "Warr woulda made that young cock eat what he was sayin', that's whut he'd a done." Havasu spat again.

"They had trouble one time before, Mr. Dashiel an' Perry did," Peck announced. "Had a heap o' trouble. Happened at Vera Cruz."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Bill Peck held out his hand for Havasu's tobacco and was obliged. "I was there. I heared about it."

Havasu chewed methodically while Peck went on with his story. When the coxswain finished Havasu spat again. "An' they wouldn't listen to whut Warr

had to say?" he demanded. "Whut's right about that?"

"Nothin'." Peck shook his head. "But that's what happened. They cashiered Mr. Dashiel outa the Navy. That's why he's here."

Silence encompassed the two men while both chewed busily. "Whut he oughter do is kill that Perry," Havasu announced. "That's whut I'd do."

"He aimed to," Peck agreed. "Perry wouldn't fight. Said that he wouldn't fight a coward an' a cashiered officer."

Silence again. "That's whut comes of bein' a officer an' a gentleman," Havasu sneered. "They got to act nice. Me, I don't have to act nice. You reckon there'd be anythin' agin *me* killin' that no-good whelp?"

"Nothin' 'cept a rope," Peck answered. "The one they'd hang you with."

"Yeah," Havasu rejoined slowly. "That's so, ain't it? Bill, whut kind of a lookin' feller was that sojer that come out yesterday an' tol' you to send in them camels?"

"Red headed feller," Peck answered. "Freckle faced."

Havasu shook his head. "The feller Warr sent was black headed," he announced. "Somethin' mighty funny about that. Black hair don't change to red between yere an' the fort."

"That's right."

Havasu scratched his head, spat again and considered his companion with narrow blue eyes. "Me," he drawled, "I'm a goin' to do some lookin' around. Thar's sign yere I don't like. Ain't 'Pache sign neither. Say, whut's all the racket?"

Both men went to the tent door. A little party of mounted troops was trotting past the camp, accoutrements jingling, horses nervous and fidgeting as they scented the camels.

"Patrol goin' out," Peck said sagely.

"Yeah," Havasu agreed. "An' that's Perry leadin' it along of Dutch Metzger. Whar do you reckon they're goin?"

Bill Peck shook his head. "Don't know," he answered. "To take soundin's, mebbe. Here comes Mr. Dashiel."

"An' we're goin' to ketch hell," Havasu said. "He's mad. Ain't it funny how a man'll always take his mad out on the fellers that didn't do nothin' to him? I've done it myse'f. Reckon we'd better watch out, Bill."

"The glass is droppin'," Peck agreed. "Storm warnin' flyin' all right."

AT Captain Yoe's quarters others were talking about Warr Dashiel and the occurrence at Colonel Cragie's dinner. Nancy Fernal, helping Blanche Yoe with her housework, paused while making a bed and looked up with troubled eyes at her friend. The older woman, putting down her side of the bedspread, came around the tall four poster and sat down on its edge.

"What's troubling you, child?" she demanded. "Have you heard the foolish thing that happened last night?"

Nancy shook her head. "Father said that Walter Perry was drunk," she answered, "but he didn't tell me what happened."

"Then," Mrs. Yoe said wisely, "you're concerned because Mr. Dashiel hasn't come to call on you? Is that it?"

"I don't care a mite what Warr Dashiel does." Nancy tossed her head. "Whether he comes or not is a matter of complete indifference to me."

"No it's not." Mrs. Yoe reached out a hand and drew Nancy down beside her. "What happened to you, child?"

The sympathy of the voice was more than Nancy could bear. She put her head on Blanche Yoe's shoulder and while the older woman held her, she spoke, her voice muffled. "I made a fool of myself. I haven't seen Warr since that awful thing happened at Vera Cruz. He wouldn't come to see me. Father said to wait, that it would all straighten out, but he didn't come. And last night when he was leaving, I went to the hall and spoke to him. He was polite as ice and just as cold. He told me that he was glad I wasn't hurt yesterday and then he said that Walter was waiting for me, and went on out. I thought . . . . One time I thought that he cared for me, Blanche. I thought that he was going to ask me to marry him."

"And you're in love with him," Mrs. Yoe said. "Child, Walter Perry insulted Mr. Dashiel last night and Mr. Dashiel did not resent the insult. Captain Yoe told me what had happened. The captain

thought it very strange. There's something wrong, Nancy; something that we don't know anything about."

"But why should he treat me so?" Nancy sobbed against the friendly shoulder. "Why should he act as though I were a perfect stranger?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Yoe answered. "Men are queer creatures, Nancy. They're children and when they are hurt they vent their spite on the people they love. I've seen the Captain. . . . Now, dear, don't you cry. It will all come out all right. You see if it doesn't."

Under the comfort of the older woman's arms and voice, Nancy Fernal relaxed and presently the bed making was resumed. At noon, Captain Yoe, coming in for his meal, reported briefly that a patrol had been sent out that morning. "The colonel sent Perry west," he announced. "Twelve men, a guide and rations for three days."

"But I thought that the Indians were quiet," Mrs. Yoe expostulated. "We haven't sent patrols out for more than a day, Henry."

"You can't tell about Indians," Yoe answered sagely. "We've been quiet enough. The Apaches and the Navajos have been living up to their treaty agreements, but we can't tell for how long. And with the summer coming on and wagon trains going out, I think the colonel was wise."

Later when he was alone with his wife, he gave the real reason for the patrol. "Cragie wanted to get Perry away from the fort. He didn't want any trouble with the survey party. Beale was disturbed by what happened last night. He's ordered his men to stay in their camp and he and Dashiel are moving out to be with them."

At noon, too, Edward Beale, sitting across the table from Warr Dashiel, spoke of the patrol, and of the happenings at the colonel's dinner. "Mr. Perry," he said abruptly, "has been sent on patrol. I understand for three days. I hope, before the end of that time, to be ready to leave Fort Defiance, Mr. Dashiel."

Warr looked up from his plate and his voice was bitter. "Wasn't I meek enough last night, Mr. Beale?"

"You did exactly the right thing," Beale answered. "I was pleased, Warr."

"Then you are the only one that was pleased." Warr did not respond to the sincere kindness in his commander's voice.

"Everyone there had me branded as a coward. I'm even beginning to think so myself."

Beale, watching Warr's sullen face, was ready to speak again and then wisely held his tongue.

TWELVE miles west of Fort Defiance, a little squad of troopers ate their lunch and grazed their horses. Apart from the others Walter Perry and Dutch Metzger stretched on the ground, engaged in conversation.

"The colonel," Perry said angrily, "sent me out to get rid of me. There's no other reason for this patrol. Three days! We haven't sent a three days' patrol from the fort for a month!"

"Mebbe he's expectin' trouble," Metzger drawled. "It's spring an' the 'Paches are likely to turn up. Goin' to be lots of trains movin' West this summer, an' that survey party, too. Mebbe he's just bein' forehanded."

Perry scowled. "He wanted to get rid of me," he said again. "He was afraid that I'd kill that coward Dashiel. There's no chance of that. Dashiel won't fight. And by the time we get back, the wagon train will have come in and gone."

Metzger's little eyes squinted. Like everyone else at Fort Defiance he knew of the court that Lieutenant Perry had been paying to Doctor Fernal's daughter. That was the real reason for Perry's resentment at being sent on patrol. He was angry because he missed these last few days with Nancy Fernal.

"A man don't git ahead in the Army very fast, does he?" Metzger asked, abruptly changing the subject. "They kind of keep him pinned down."

"I'll be a lieutenant all my life," Perry answered bitterly. "Sometimes I'm tempted to resign. If it wasn't for . . ." Perry did not complete his thought. He would not tell Dutch Metzer that he stayed in the Army because he had to; that his people in the East would disown him should he resign; that they wanted their black sheep on the frontier, away

from civilization and an opportunity to disgrace them.

"If there was fightin', a man would get ahead faster," Metzger drawled. "Folks git killed when there's fightin' an' a man that does the job gits ahead."

"There's no chance of fighting," Perry said bitterly. "The Indians are observing their treaty agreement. I thought when I came to Defiance that I might see some action. But no! It's as placid as a lake."

"I know," Metzger's little eyes strayed from Perry's face, "where there's a winter camp of 'Paches. They ain't moved yet. Ol' Chee an' his outfit ain't above forty mile from here. Down in Caliente Canyon. They been there all winter."

Perry looked sharply at Metzger's face. It was devoid of all expression. "An officer would be courtmartialed for stirring up trouble with the Apaches!" he snapped. "Do you think I'm a fool, Metzger?"

The scout shrugged buckskin covered shoulders. "I didn't say nothin' about stirrin' up trouble," he drawled. "Ol' Chee has got a lot of young bucks with him. He's probably havin' trouble holdin' 'em in. I reckon if Chee lost his grip on them young braves there'd be fightin' a plenty."

"But he won't lose his grip," Perry answered. "We'll not see action, Metzger."

"Yuh cain't never tell," the scout drawled. "Chee's a mean ol' devil. I had trouble with him myse'f. He run me outa his camp one time an' all I wanted was a squaw. Hell!" The scout heaved himself to his feet, looked down at Perry and then strolled off to where the troopers were resting. Perry, after a moment, also arose.

"We'll move on, Sergeant," he ordered crisply.

The big Irish sergeant said "Yis sorr" and turned to the troopers. Later, as the patrol moved across the barren red bluffed country, Dutch Metzger fell back from his place at Perry's side. At the end of the little column he swung into line again, riding beside a red haired buck-toothed man named Carmichael who, at Fort Defiance, acted as Walter Perry's striker.

"Say, Red," Metzger drawled. "You think a lot of the lieutenant, don't you?"

Carmichael grunted. "He pays me."

"Mebbe he'd pay you more," Metzger drawled. "I got an idea, Red. You game for somethin'?"

"I'm game for anythin' that makes me money in this damned country," Carmichael growled. "Spit it out, Dutch. What's on yore mind?"

THE day after Walter Perry led his men from Fort Defiance, a little party arrived from the west. These were men from the California gold fields enroute home, sturdy, bewhiskered individuals who asked odds from no one. They drove big California mules, much larger animals than those generally used in the New Mexico country, and it was natural that Beale, wishing all the information he could get concerning his proposed route, should question them. Warr and Havasu were present during the interview. One of the California men was an old acquaintance of the scout's and when Beale was done with his questioning, Havasu and his friend foregathered at the sutler's store. Late that night Warr, making a round of the sentries at the camp, heard Havasu's unmelodious voice lifted in song and, having cautioned his sentinel, went out to bring the old man in.

Havasu was drunk. His legs were unsteady and his breath was heavy with liquor, but his mind was functioning. He tried to level his rifle as Warr approached, then, as Warr sternly reproved him, lowered the weapon. Warr put his hand under Havasu's arm and warned him to silence.

"Shut up, Havasu! Do you want Beale to hear you? He'll know you're drunk."

"Sure I'm drunk," Havasu mumbled. "So'ud you be iffen you was me. Lesh all git drunk, Warr. Lesh git *good'n* drunk!"

"Come on now." Warr helped Havasu over loose rock, keeping the old man from stumbling. "You're already drunk; you don't need me to help you."

"Who wouldn' git drunk? Pashin' up the chansh of a lifetime. I gi' Beale my word or I'd be rich."

Warr helped the scout into his tent and plumped him down on his bed. "You stay there," he warned. "You got to sober up, Havasu. Go to sleep."

"Can't sleep. Got to go with Beale to Californy an' then it'll be too late. It'll

all be gone. Sid down, Warr."

Patiently Warr seated himself beside Simms. "All right," he said. "All right, Havasu."

"Know whut?" Havasu's whisper was confidential. "Know whut Jacks told me? Thar's a ledge of gol', Warr. Grea' big ledge. I know whar it is."

"You lie back and go to sleep, Havasu," Warr ordered. "Tell me in the morning. I'm sleepy. I've got to work tomorrow."

"Thas ri'." Obediently Havasu lay down. "Got to work. Give Beale m' word an' got to keep it. Got to take him to Californy. Can't git rish."

Warr waited until the old man's snores pierced the night and then went to his quarters, slipping in so that he would not disturb Beale. As he lay down he wondered what vagrant imagination had possessed Havasu. Probably the miners from California had got him drunk and filled him full of stories of gold.

The next morning Havasu's drunken maunderings were forgotten for, just before noon, Perry returned with his patrol. There were two wounded men in the little party, and the marks of fighting were plain upon them all. Beale was with Colonel Cragie when Perry made his report but the facts of what had occurred were spread over the fort and its environs before Perry ever left the Colonel's office. It was Bill Peck who brought the news to the surveyor's camp and retailed it there to Warr and the others.

Havasu, who was cherishing a head as big as a barrel, grunted when he heard Peck's report, and walked off toward the fort intent on getting a broader version of what had happened. Warr let the others question Peck for a time and then put them to work again. The surveyors were almost ready to leave Fort Defiance and Warr wished if possible to hasten their departure.

At noon, when the men knocked off work and Beale came out to the camp, Warr got a better idea of what had occurred. Beale's story, however, save for elaborating details, was the same that Peck had given. Perry had made a camp and posted sentries. The horses had been picketed and under guard; nevertheless, when morning broke, two of the horses were found to be missing and the tracks about the picket line said that Indians had stolen them during the night. Perry, with Metzger doing the tracking, had followed the thieves, found an Apache *rancheria* and attacked it, recovering the horses, killing a few Indians, and suffering two minor casualties in his command. The Apaches had fled, and Perry, by forced march, returned to Fort Defiance.

"Colonel Cragie is ordering out a larger patrol," Beale completed. "Captain Yoe will command it. They leave this afternoon. The Colonel is quite upset about the occurrence. This is the first time in some months that Apaches have raided in his territory."

"Will it delay us?" Warr asked.

Beale shook his head. "I don't think so," he answered. "The Indians will hardly attack as well armed and numerous a party as we will be. No. I think we'll leave as we planned, in the morning."

BY mid-afternoon Warr had completed his work. All the supplies were in their proper places and packed. The packs had been assigned, as had the men. With a sense of accomplishment he showed Beale his dispositions and listened to Beale's curt praise.

"Very good, Mr. Dashiel. Very good indeed."

There was nothing more to do. In the morning the tents would be struck and mules and camels loaded, then good-by to Fort Defiance. Havasu, looking much the worse for wear after his drinking bout, wandered up to where Warr rested and, stopping, voiced his complaint.

"I got a head on me big as a keg. I got to have a dram, Warr. I'm goin' to the sutler's store an' git it."

Warr well knew what might happen if Havasu visited the sutler's. One dram would lead to another and that to a third. And in the morning Havasu must be alert and ready to travel. "I'll go with you, Havasu," he announced. "One drink is all you'll take."

Havasu offered no objection; he wanted his drink too badly.

At the store Warr stood by while Havasu bought his dram. The old man would have liked a second potion but Warr's stern eyes forbade. The California men were still encamped close to

the sutler's and two of them were in the store. Havasu talked to them while Warr waited impatiently. So it was that when Walter Perry and Nancy Fernal entered the store, Warr was at the grog counter. He did not see either Nancy or Perry and it was not until he heard an altercation at the door, and Perry's voice raised sharply, that he turned. Hadji Ali was at the door and Perry grasped him by the collar. Warr, leaving the counter, hurried to the angry officer and the Syrian. The old peremptory quarterdeck authority returned to Warr as it always did in moments of stress, and his voice was harsh as he rasped his question. "What's wrong here?"

Perry did not answer. His face was twisted into a mask of anger and he shook Hadji Ali savagely. The little Syrian was like a rag in the big soldier's grasp. Warr, catching Perry's arm, wrenched down and forced the release of his man. "What's wrong here?" he demanded again.

HADJI ALI, released, promptly produced eight inches of shining steel from some hiding place in his loose clothing, and crouched, preparatory to springing. Havasu, arriving at that instant, collared the Syrian and took away his knife. Warr faced Perry.

"Lieutenant . . ." he began, and got no further. Perry blazed out at him.

"Keep your camel-herders to yourself, Dashiel! I'll not have them where I am. You miserable coward. You're . . ." That was as far as Perry went. All the hot blood in Warr blazed to fury and his fist lashing out caught Perry on the mouth and knocked him back against the door jamb.

It was as though the blow were a signal. A burly sergeant who had been lounging at the counter, leaped into action against Warr. Havasu disposed of him by swinging a bottle over his head. Two other soldiers jumped up to avenge their sergeant. Half a squad of men on the store porch came plunging through the door and enthusiastically entered the combat, as did the two Californians. Hadji Ali, deprived of his knife but not without resource, caught up a three legged stool and threw it, tripping the first arrivals from the door and so giving Warr a little time to welcome them. The sutler's clerk came squawling over the counter to tangle with Havasu, and the sutler himself, wise in the ways of brawling men, ran pell-mell out of the back door of his establishment and toward the fort, bawling for the guard as he ran. All in all it was a very pretty melee and when presently the guard arrived they found Warr, Havasu, Hadji Ali and the Californians in possession of the field, the sutler's clerk on his back—unconscious of it all—the soldiers driven to the porch, and Walter Perry, his lips cut and bleeding and his face white, facing Warr. Warr had wrested Perry's pistol from his grasp when the lieutenant drew it.

The sergeant of the guard halted his men on the porch and looked to Perry for orders.

"Arrest those men, sergeant," Perry snapped. "All of them." That order given, he turned and stamped out of the store. The sergeant looked after him with angry eyes and then turned apologetically to Warr.

"I'm sorry, sorr," the sergeant said. "But ye heard the lieutenant. I've got to arrest ye."

Anger drained out of Warr like water from a spigot. His square shoulders slumped. "We'll go with you, sergeant," he said wearily. "You won't have any trouble."

The Californians offered objection to arrest but gave in when the sergeant ordered in his guard. Havasu and Hadji Ali followed Warr's lead. Escorted by the file of troopers the combatants left the store: soldiers, Californians, Warr Dashiel and Hadji Ali. Half way to the fort they were met by Beale and Nancy Fernal.

When the trouble broke in the store Nancy waited an instant and then fled. She ran to the fort and meeting Beale crossing the compound, caught his arm and blurted out her story. Alarmed by the girl, Beale started instantly for the store, hoping to avert trouble. But the sergeant and the guard preceded him and he was too late. Now as he met the men returning from the store, he halted them.

"What is this, Mr. Dashiel?" he demanded sternly. "You've been fighting?"

At that moment Warr had no appre-

ciation for Beale's position or his alarm. "You can see for yourself," he answered. "We're under arrest."

"You will release Mr. Dashiel in my custody, sergeant," Beale ordered.

The sergeant shook his head. "I've orders from Lieutenant Perry, sorr. I'm takin' thim all to the guardhouse."

Beale did not argue but turned abruptly and strode toward the fort. Nancy hesitated an instant and for the first time Warr saw the girl. He misinterpreted her presence, believing that because she had been with Perry, she had brought the guard. Deliverately he turned his eyes from her and spoke to the sergeant.

"Take us to the guardhouse. You have your orders."

The little party moved forward, and Nancy, hurt by Warr's deliberate slight, ran after Beale, catching him just as he reached the gate.

"It wasn't Mr. Dashiel's fault," she said as she reached Beale's side. "It wasn't his fault, Mr. Beale."

Beale, angry because of the disturbance and an outbreak of the friction he had hoped to avoid, paid no attention to the girl. "We'll determine that," he snapped, and went on toward Cragie's office. Nancy, left at the gate, looked back to see Warr and his companions coming toward her, and then, not knowing what to do the girl went on toward Captain Yoe's house. She would seek Blanche Yoe's counsel.

WHEN Beale reached the headquarters office he found Perry already there reporting to Cragie. Perforce Beale waited until the colonel was free. When finally Perry came out of the office he wore a mocking grin. The orderly announced Beale and pushing through the door Beale found Colonel Cragie at his desk, a scowl on his face.

For days Beale had known that the commandant of Fort Defiance was not in sympathy with the survey. Cragie felt that the task should have been given the Army, more particularly to him who commanded the fort. Beale was working under a disadvantage, fighting for every point he gained, and now all his work was ruined. He was closeted with Cragie for half an hour and when he came out his face was stormy and he went directly to the guardhouse. There he presented an order for the release of his men.

Warr knew what was coming when he saw Beale's face. All the time he had spent in the guardhouse, anger had been building up in him. He had been justified in what he did, he was sure of that. Any man is justified in defending himself and in resenting an insult. So when Beale stalked in and presented his order, Warr nerved himself.

The California men were not included in Beale's order and so only Hadji Ali, Havasu and Warr were released. Beale said nothing beyond, "Come with me," and stalked ahead of his men toward the survey camp.

When the camp was reached, Hadji Ali was dismissed and Beale ordered Warr and Havasu to his tent. There he seated himself behind his small folding table and, arms folded, scowled at Warr and Havasu.

"I must demand the meaning of this disgraceful conduct," Beale snapped. "Mr. Dashiel, you had my strict orders not to pursue your quarrel with Lieutenant Perry and I had your word that you would not cause trouble with him. You have broken that word."

It was the old story over again. On one occasion Warr Dashiel had faced a courtmartial, ready to defend himself, and had not been allowed to speak a word in his own behalf. Now he looked bitterly at Beale and kept his silence. Not so Havasu.

"We was in the store," Havasu drawled. "Tendin' to our business, Beale. Hadji Ali was there an' this sojer jumped him an' was shakin' the liver outen him. Warr stopped that an' the sojer called him a dirty coward. Natchully Warr hit him. He'd oughter of kilt him."

Beale looked at Havasu. "You had no business in the store," he charged. "I've ordered all my men to stay in camp. You disobeyed that order. You, too, Mr. Dashiel. What have you to say for yourself?"

Warr's bitterness broke bounds. "I've nothing to say," he answered coldly. "You have Perry's story, no doubt, and Miss Fernal's corroboration. Anything I might say would not be believed. I was brought up in the Navy tradition, Mr. Beale. A

commander backs his men. It is evident that you have not heard of that tradition."

Beale flushed. He was angry as Warr and all his sense of justice was stifled by his anger. "I had heard," he said coldly, "that you were not given fair trial by your courtmartial, Mr. Dashiel. I'm inclined to believe that the rumor was unjustified. You broke the word you gave me and I cannot have a man under my command who will not keep his word."

"You haven't!" Warr snapped. "I'm not under your command, Mr. Beale. I consider myself dismissed from your party."

"And you are entirely correct," Beale said coldly. "You will remove your baggage from this camp. You are dismissed."

Warr wheeled and strode out of the tent. Behind him he heard Havasu's angry voice berating Beale.

He was in his own tent collecting his personal effects when Havasu came in. Havasu plumped himself down on Warr's bed and held out his hand. There was a little stack of gold pieces on Havasu's calloused palm.

"I made that jasper pay us," Havasu drawled. "Git yore traps together, Warr. We're movin' down to whar them Californy boys is camped."

Warr looked in surprise at the scout. Havasu nodded cheerfully. "Shore I quit," he said. "You think I'd stan' around an' let Beale do that to you? Not by a jug full! I tol' him whar at he got off, I did. An' I'm danged glad of it. Now you an' me'll go git rich, Warr. Richer'n hell. I been wantin' to quit this layout ever since last night."

"But Beale . . ." Warr began.

"He kin git another guide," Havasu snapped. "Don't feel so danged bad about it, Warr. You done the right thing. Any man would a done whut you did. An' I tell you somethin', boy: thar ain't nothin' that a pile of gold won't cure!"

HAVASU chuckled for perhaps the tenth time that morning. He bestrode a big California jennet, a magnificent beast that stood perhaps fifteen hands. Warr, mounted on a mule as big as the jennet, glanced at his companion. Warr could see nothing amusing in their situation. They were riding west into a hostile barren country and Fort Defiance lay twenty miles behind them.

"What's the joke?" Warr demanded.

"I dunno," Havasu answered evasively. "I jest kinda feel good, that's all."

Warr scowled. He could not see why Havasu felt good, why anyone should feel good, although the morning was glorious. Ahead of the men two more mules trotted, packs thumping on their backs. "I want to know where we're headed," Warr demanded. "And why we're going there."

Havasu glanced sharply at his companion. "Last night an' this mornin' when we pulled out, you didn't seem much interested," he drawled. "I'll tell you whar we're goin' an' why we're goin'. An' I'll tell you why we traded for these yere big Californy mules an' the supplies from the sutler. We're headed to git rich, we are."

"That's what you said last night."

"An' thet's whut I meant. You was low down an' feelin' bad an' you wasn't a carin' whut happened to you, but now yo're beginnin' to set up an' take notice." Havasu chuckled again.

The old man's deliberation and secretiveness were maddening. Warr reined in his mule. "I want to know where we're headed," he said stubbornly.

"Ride along," Havasu commanded. "I'm goin' to tell you, ain't I?"

He started his jennet and, perforce, Warr also moved.

"I went down to visit them Californy boys," Havasu said deliberately, savoring each word, "an' we taken a few drams together. They got to talkin'. Them boys made a stake in the diggin's an' they got to showin' me samples of whut they had. Ol' Jack showed me some stuff that he called quartz. Kind of white an' brown an' all shot through with gold. He said that was the stuff that made a man rich. An' right thar I recollected whar at I'd seen a pile of it. Right thar!"

Havasu paused and looked at Warr. The interest growing on Warr's sullen face repaid him for his deliberation. "Shucks!" Havasu growled. "I'd allus thought you had to dig for gold. I didn't know you could find it layin' on top of the ground. Thar's a whole heap of that rock down in Caliente Canyon not forty miles from yere."

"But all quartz doesn't hold gold, Havasu," Warr said. "Most of it doesn't."

"This yere does," Havasu answered sturdily. "An' I'll tell you how I know. I traded fur with ol' Chee one time an' Chee had some gold. I tried to find out whar at he'd got it an' the ol' devil wouldn't say. But Chee hangs out around Caliente Canyon an' I jest added up whut I knowed when Jack showed me that rock."

They rode along in silence following Havasu's statement. Warr's mind was busy. Perhaps Havasu was right. Perhaps there was gold in the quartz that lay in Caliente Canyon. And if there was not, what difference did it make? What difference would it make to a cashiered Naval officer, to a man accused of breaking his word? To a ruined man?

"We'll go and look at it anyhow," Warr said.

"Shore," Havasu agreed placidly. "That's whar we're headed."

The mules trotted along and Warr's thoughts kept pace with their hoof beats. He remembered Havasu's words, "Thar ain't nothin' that a pile of gold won't cure."

Warr wondered if the old man was right. Suppose they did find gold? Suppose they made a rich strike? What then? Would that rehabilitate him with Beale and with his friends in the East? Would it make a difference with Nancy Fernal? Thinking of the girl, all the old bitterness returned. She had been with Perry in the store, she had seen what happened and heard Perry's insult. And she had run to bring the guard. Warr was sure of that. She must be, he thought, in love with Walter Perry. There could be no other reason for her actions. Again he remembered how she had leaned against Perry that day when the camels had frightened the mule team and the wagon had almost struck her and the children.

"A whole pile of gold," Havasu said. "It's thar, Warr. I know it's thar. How else would ol' Chee git it?"

"I don't know," Warr answered shortly. "I don't know." He was speaking more to himself than Havasu, giving the answer to his own questions rather than those of his companion.

"We're goin' to find out tomorrer," Havasu growled. "Mebbe *you* don't know, but I shore do."

All that day the two men traveled steadily and as evening came they began the long ascent of Caliente Canyon.

"Chee's got a *rancheria* around yere some place," Havasu stated. "This yere is his winter camp country. We'd better go kinda light an' easy, Warr. He mought not like our bein' yere."

Warr had known that there was danger in their journey ever since Havasu mentioned their destination. "And if Chee's here?" he asked.

"Then we stall aroun' an' make out like we'd come to trade, an' after a while we pull out. We can come back after he's gone."

That was sensible enough. It would work all right except for one thing—Perry's brush with the Apaches. If the Indians were raiding . . .

"Looky thar!" Havasu exclaimed.

They had rounded a corner of rock and a long stretch of canyon lay before them. Warr could see the brush *jacals* where Apaches had spent the winter season, the drying-racks for meat, and all the appurtenances of an Indian camp. But there were no Indians.

"They done pulled out," Havasu announced gleefully. "Ain't that luck, Warr?"

Now the two men rode on, drawing close to the Apache encampment. When they reached the first of the brush dwellings Havasu paused, scanned the ground, and then dismounted. "Now this yere's funny," he said. "Plumb funny."

WARR, too, dismounted. Outside the house there were blankets, cut to shreds, a few skins, also cut, and some cooking utensils and a broken bow close by the door.

"The brave was killed," Havasu explained when he came back to Warr's side. "This yere is the place whar Perry jumped 'em. The squaws cut this stuff up. An' that's why Chee pulled out. He wasn't takin' chances on bein' caught here agin'."

Havasu's explanation was logical enough. "So?" Warr prompted.

"So we'll pull on a ways outen the dirt they left, an' make our camp. Tomorrer we'll go up whar that rock's layin'."

"It's kinda funny," Havasu drawled as they rode on through the deserted camp. "You mought say it's downright queer."

"What's queer, Havasu?"

"The whole danged thing." Havasu glanced at Warr. "It ain't reasonable. It ain't accordin' to the nature of 'em."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean," Havasu explained, "Perry comin' down on Chee the way he done. Lookit, Warr. Accordin' to the yarn Perry told, he had some hawses stole. That's right, ain't it?"

Warr nodded.

"An' Metzger trailed 'em yere an' Perry jumped the camp an' got his hawses back."

Again Warr nodded.

"It never happened that away," Havasu stated definitely. "First place, iffen the 'Paches had stold them hawses they'd of took 'em a far distance, not yere. An' if they had brought 'em yere they'd of hid the trail so as Metzger nor nobody else could 'a' found it. An' if they'd brought them hawses yere they'd of had guards out an' Perry couldn't a slipped up on 'em. That brave was kilt right in his *jacal*. You could see whar he'd fought. Nope. It just ain't so."

"What did happen then?" Warr demanded.

HAVASU shook his head. "I dunno. But it wasn't like Perry tol' it. Yere's the springs. Le's make our camp."

Warr labored under Havasu's direction while camp was made. The old man knew how. He was an artist at hiding and when finally a smokeless fire burned under the cook pot, Warr was satisfied that they were as safe as a man could be in that desolate country.

Before sunup the next morning they went on, following along the reaches of the canyon. An hour's travel brought them to where side canyons entered and, unerringly, Havasu took the right fork. Another quarter hour of travel brought them to where a ridge shoved out from the mountain side. Beyond the ridge Havasu stopped.

"Lookit thar," he ordered.

Warr could see the quartz, the small pebbles of it under his mule's feet. He dismounted. "It comes from up above," he commented.

"Comes from right thar." Havasu pointed. "Yere! Take yore rifle. Don't never lay yore gun down in this country, Warr. It just ain't safe."

Side by side the two men climbed to a little bench. Above them a vein of quartz showed, brown and white, rotted by exposure. Warr, scrambling up, broke off a chunk and looked at it. "There's no gold in this, Havasu," he said quietly.

"Thar's plenty in this chunk," Havasu answered, just as quietly. "I reckon we're rich, Warr. All we got to do is git it out." He extended his hand. A lump of quartz, shot through with golden flecks, lay on his palm.

"That's all we've got to do," Warr drawled. "It's enough. Do you know anything about mining, Havasu?"

Havasu grinned and shook his head. "I plumb forgot to learn," he answered. "Do you?"

"No." For an instant the two stared at each other and then the humor of it struck them and they laughed.

"Right yere," Havasu declared, "is whar we start learnin'. Le's go make some kind of a camp, Warr. This yere quartz rock ain't goin' to run away."

For two days Havasu and Warr worked at the outcrop. At first it was easy enough to break off the rotted quartz with the pick, but as they followed the vein into the hill, the work became more difficult. They sorted the rock as they broke it down, putting the gold bearing chunks into one pile, the dross in another. At the end of the second day they had gone as far as they could with their primitive equipment.

"We need powder," Warr said, consulting with Havasu. "And we need somebody who knows how to do this. We've reached the end of our rope, Havasu."

Reluctantly Havasu agreed. "Whut'll we do then?" he demanded.

Warr thought deeply for a time. "There is a geologist with Beale's party," he announced. "We'll talk to him. No one knows where this is, but the two of us, Havasu. It's safe enough. We'll find Beale and talk to Lynchfield. He's a geologist and he'll tell us what to do."

"Are we goin' to leave this rock yere?" Havasu gestured toward the pile of high-grade.

Warr shook his head. "We'll take it with us," he decided. "We'll need money to develop a mine here and this gold we've found will furnish it. I'll make canvas sacks out of our bed tarpaulins so that we can carry it."

"An' I'll cache part of our outfit so we'll have room," Havasu agreed.

IT took one full day to prepare sacks to carry the highgrade, to select the few articles they intended to take with them and cache the rest of their outfit and to re-sort the ore. There was too much of this latter to pack at one time and so reluctantly Warr and Havasu selected only the richest of the rock and hid the rest. As evening came they rested, their packs made up, the mules picketed close to their hidden camp. Havasu, restless as always, picked up his rifle and walked down toward the main canyon. Warr remained in camp, cooking over a tiny fire. Havasu did not return and Warr's anxiety grew as time wore on. He left the camp and followed down the side canyon for a distance, thinking that he might meet the scout. He saw nothing of Havasu and became even more anxious. Returning to camp he kicked sand over his fire. Something was wrong. The last light was disappearing above the canyon. Havasu should have returned long ago.

Warr did not hear Havasu at all when the scout came back. There was a soft hiss and then the scout said, "Warr!"

Havasu was at the edge of the brush. Warr wheeled in alarm and the scout entered the open space. "'Paches," he whispered. "Down in the main canyon. Thar's a million of 'em, Warr."

Warr waited for Havasu to take the lead. The old man moved swiftly, bringing the mules into the camp, lifting the pack saddles in place. He said nothing as he worked, and Warr, working beside him, kept his silence. They moved swiftly, competently, without sound or waste of effort. Havasu lifted one of the sacks of highgrade and put it on a saddle. He picked up the other sack and then lowered it and shook his head. "Got to leave it," he whispered. "We're goin' outa here aflyin', Warr. I'll hide this stuff." Picking up the sack Havasu again disappeared into the brush.

All light had gone when he returned. The mules loomed black in the night and Havasu was a black wraith that moved beside the mules.

"They're down the canyon," the scout whispered. "At the ol' *rancheria*. They're meetin' thar. Some of 'em come down the canyon an' some pulled in from the flats. Somethin' stirrin', Warr. Somethin' bad."

"How will we leave?" Warr asked.

"Pull out up the canyon. Git on top an' drop south. Find a way to git offen the rimrock an' hightail it for Fort Defiance."

Mentally Warr corrected the program but he said nothing. There were many things in his mind, many factors. Havasu led his mule up, tied the halter rope of a lead mule to his saddle horn, and Warr followed the scout's example. Now, leaving the camp, they led their animals along the rising canyon floor, moving cautiously, stopping whenever a mule's hoof clicked on rock, listening intently. For perhaps fifteen minutes they walked and led their animals, and then Havasu mounted.

"Far enough," he said, keeping his voice low but not whispering. "We ride from here."

They went on up the canyon, Warr keeping as close to Havasu as he could, but lacking, it seemed, the old man's almost second sight that carried him effortlessly around or over obstacles. Finally Warr gave up trying to guide his mule and gave the animal its head. He got along better after that for the mule followed Havasu unerringly. There came a last steep pull and the scout stopped. Warr reached his side.

"The top," Havasu grunted. "Now we strike south."

Again they moved, threading their way along a ridge. In the night and with the country a labyrinth about them, Warr was completely lost. Only the stars above him were clear beacons that charted their course. On many a night Warr Dashiel had paced the deck of a ship and watched the stars. Now he watched them again, learning from them that, turn and twist as they might, they progressed steadily southward. Then Havasu halted once more, and Warr, stopping beside him, saw that they had come to a rim, a gigantic, sheer descent to the plain below.

"We ain't too far east of the canyon

mouth," Havasu said. "Not more'n a mile or so. We got to git down, Warr. Seems like I remember a little break along yere someplace."

They turned east then, following the rim. Havasu found the canyon he remembered, not a canyon really but a crack that broke down from the rim. Once more the men dismounted and led the mules, freeing their lead animals and keeping them between the saddle mules. Once they had started down there was no chance for a mule to stray. The way was rough, beset by rocks, almost impassable. Twice Havasu stopped and walked on ahead alone, picking out the path while Warr waited. Finally they reached the bottom and were on the plain, cedars standing around them, black in the starlight.

"An' now we hit for Fort Defiance," Havasu grated.

"No." Warr's voice was calm. "Not yet, Havasu."

"Lissen"—Havasu's voice was fierce—"the way I kept my hair this long is by lookin' after it. I'm goin' to the fort."

"Beale's out ahead somewhere," Warr answered, "and there was a wagon train due in the fort. It's come and gone by now. It's somewhere west of Fort Defiance. We've got to find out what these Apaches mean to do and we've got to warn Beale and the wagon train."

For just an instant Havasu made no answer. Then— "Yo're goin' to warn Beale after whut he done to you?"

"You go to the fort, Havasu," Warr answered. "Tell Colonel Cragie what you've seen. The fact that the Indians are gathering ought to be reason enough for him to move. I'll wait and see where they go. Then I'll strike south to find Beale and the wagons."

"You got a high opinion of me!" Havasu snorted. "Thar's as much chance of me leavin' you as thar is of a snowball floatin' in hell!"

"But somebody ought to go to the fort. And there's the gold, Havasu. You don't want to lose that."

"The fort ain't goin' to be hurt," Havasu growled. "An' the gold'll stay yere, where we'll leave it. We'll jest turn them pack mules loose. They'll git back to Defiance. That's home to 'em an' they'll go to whar at they been fed. Iffen yo're goin' to fool aroun' yere an' be a fool I'm goin' to he'p ye. Come on, le's git to work."

STRIPPING the packs and saddles from the mules did not take long. Havasu hid the packs in the mouth of the little canyon they had followed from the rim. The mules hung around, loath to leave the saddle animals. A few rocks, well thrown, discouraged them and they drifted them off into the night. "An' that's that," Havasu said. "Now whut?"

"If we knew what they intended," Warr said, speaking of the Apaches, "we'd have a better idea of what we ought to do."

For a while the scout did not answer. Then: "See that butte out thar?"

Warr looked south where the black square top of a butte jutted against the skyline. "Yes."

"We'll make fer it. We can watch the mouth of Caliente from it. When the 'Paches move we'll see which way they start. Iffen they hit east we'll git to the fort ahead of 'em. Iffen they don't, we'll know which way to go. They got scouts out. They'll be watchin' Beale an' the wagons too, iffen thar's wagons movin'."

The suggestion was sensible. Warr mounted his mule. "Danged 'Paches," Havasu growled, riding beside Warr. "I had a fortune, right thar in my hand an' the devils made me leave it." Warr did not answer as they rode along through the starlit night.

At the foot of the cedar dotted butte the two men stopped. Dismounting, they made themselves as comfortable as possible and waited. Havasu, having offered his plug to Warr and had it declined, chewed methodically. For the most part they maintained silence but occasionally one or the other spoke. The stars marched by overhead and Warr watched them. A tinge of light, false dawn, came in the east. Then the true dawn lighted the sky. Havasu arose and stretched. "Better git up the hill a little," he said. "Whar we c'n see." They led the mules up the slope, stopping again in an opening.

All about them the country lay spread, its reaches growing more vast as the light came. To the west and east and south, mountains laid sawtooth edges against the sky. To the north the red bluff of the

hill, broken by the gaping mouth of Caliente Canyon, spread away. From the canyon smoke arose, gray at first, then changing to black and then becoming gray again. Havasu got up, grunted and moved along the slope. South and west of them another pillar of smoke, faint in the distance, climbed skyward.

"Signalin'," the scout grunted. "One of 'em's tellin' the rest somethin'. Wisht I could read whut they're sayin'."

The smoke to south and west died away. On the north the gray column spiraled up once more and then it, too, died. "Not long now," Havasu growled.

It was not long. Presently, in the morning light, they could see dots issuing from the mouth of Caliente Canyon, little moving ants upon the plain. The head of that savage column appeared and disappeared into a fold of ground and still the ants came, a constant, never-ending procession of them.

"Lawd, Lawd!" The exclamation was jerked from Havasu. "I never seed so many! Never!"

"They're headed southwest," Warr said quietly. "It's time to go, Havasu." The two mounted their mules and putting the bluff between themselves and the moving Indians, struck south.

Now the big California mules proved their worth. They were tireless, traveling at a trot. The miles slid past, one after another. At mid-morning, in the barren wasteland, Havasu, by some legerdemain, found a spring and the mules were watered. For a while the pace was slowed and then the tireless trot began again.

They speculated as they rode, Warr listening to Havasu draw on his store of knowledge and spill it forth. Either Beale's camp or a wagon train must be near by the first smoke they had seen, Havasu said. "They put out scouts," he amplified. "Thar ain't hardly nothin' in a country they don't see. An' thar was sure a mort of 'em. More'n I ever seen before. They're movin'. They're goin' to hit an' hit hard. Perry sure stirred 'em up when he jumped that *rancheria.*"

"But why?" Warr asked. "They'd stolen Perry's horses. They must have known the troops would punish them."

"A 'Pache works different," Havasu explained. "When thar's Injuns kilt by whites then the Injuns git even. They kill white men to make up for the braves they lost. An' they don't care whut white men they kill, neither. They . . . By golly!"

"What is it, Havasu?"

"I'll bet you that Perry collected some squaws an' kids when he jumped ol' Chee! Injuns don't put much value on a squaw but they do on a kid. An' the bucks get pretty ringy when thar women's kilt, no matter whut they say. That's whut stirred 'em up."

Warr made no comment but he thought that Havasu must be right. And he thought, too, that the white men in the New Mexico territory were going to pay a mighty price for two horses stolen, and re-claimed by Walter Perry.

AT noon, with the sun high overhead, they struck tracks. Here in a sandy wash, wagons had passed. The mule tracks were pointed west and Havasu and Warr stopped. They must decide a problem. Now Warr took the lead and gave the orders.

"You go east, Havasu," he announced quietly. "Get to Fort Defiance and tell them what we've seen, and find Beale and give him warning. I'll join the wagons and warn them."

Havasu would have argued but Warr was adamant. The troops at the fort must be informed, he pointed out, and so must the wagon men. "One of us has got to go one way, one the other. I can follow these tracks and you can make better time than I can going to the fort."

Havasu's eyes were shrewd. There was another reason for Warr's wishing to join the wagons. Havasu remembered how Warr had looked at Nancy Fernal, and the fact that Doctor Fernal was to accompany the first train from Fort Defiance to Fort Yuma.

"All right," he growled, "I'll git to Defiance. But Warr, them 'Paches will jump you before I c'n bring the sojers. They'll hit you aroun' sundown. That's thar pet time. You take care of yorese'f."

"I'll be careful," Warr promised. "And if we're ready for them they won't attack. Good-by, Havasu."

Hands gripped briefly. Havasu growled, "*Adios,* Warr," and the two separated,

one riding east, the other west along the wagon tracks.

IT took Warr two hours to travel what was a laborious day's journey for the wagons. Crowning a long ridge he saw the train ahead of him. Fifteen wagons strung out in double column, plodding along toward the sloping sun. The light glinted from the accoutrements of a little party of horsemen that rode beside the foremost wagon, and Warr knew that the train had been given an escort out of Fort Defiance. He prodded his weary mule with the hard heels of his boots and rode on down toward the wagons.

The people in the first wagon Warr passed, stared at him curiously, but he did not pause. The train captain would be somewhere at the head of the column. Along the line he went until, coming abreast of the lead wagon he saw that it was an army ambulance drawn by four mules. A blue clad man rode out toward him, halted, and as Warr came on he saw that it was Walter Perry. From the farther side of the train another man rode out—square-shouldered, hard-bitten Dutch Metzger. Warr rode on steadily and reined in not ten feet from Perry.

"What are you doing here?" Perry snapped. "Following us?"

"Following you," Warr answered steadily. "I've come to warn you. There are about two hundred Apaches headed this way to attack this train."

Perry laughed, a short harsh bark. "Did you hear that, Dutch?" he demanded. "Dashiel here says that we're to be attacked by two hundred Apaches. He's come to warn us. You're scouting for this train. Have you seen any Indian sign?"

Metzger shook his head. "No sign," he answered.

"And you expect me to believe you?" Perry laughed in Warr's face. "It's a likely story. You're the last man that would warn me of anything."

"I didn't come to warn you, Perry," Warr answered levelly. "I came to warn the wagon train. Where is your train captain?"

Almost as though in answer to the question, another man came loping out to join the three, pulling his horse to a halt beside Perry. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Are you the train captain?" Warr asked, and then, without waiting for an answer: "I've come to warn you. There's a bunch of Apaches headed this way to attack your train."

"It's a likely story, Brown," Perry snapped before the train captain could speak. "This man is a cashiered Naval officer. He wouldn't know an Apache if he saw one. He's come to make what trouble he can, and to delay us."

Under his tan Warr's face was white. "I came to warn you," he repeated, and then, his temper burning out: "You fools! Didn't you see the signal smokes this morning. Do you think I've ridden since sunrise on a fool's errand?"

Brown, the train captain, looked doubtfully from Perry to Warr and back again. "There was some smokes," he said. "Mebbe . . ."

"I tell you this man is lying!" Perry snapped. "He's come to make trouble. Metzger here is chief scout for Fort Defiance. He's been ahead of the train and he says there's no sign of Indians. Whom do you want to believe: Metzger or this man here?"

There was still doubt in Brown's eyes. "We wanted to make it to the creek before we camped," he said. "I dunno. You didn't see no sign, Metzger?"

"Not a bit."

"I reckon we'll go on, Mister," Brown made his decision. He wheeled his horse and loped back to the halted train. The lead wagons moved forward as he arrived.

"And you're not wanted here," Perry snarled at Warr. "Get out or I'll have my men put you under arrest as a trouble maker. Come, Dutch." He, too, wheeled his charger and loped back to the wagons. Warr sat there on his weary mule, watching the wagons roll ahead. Then, with a sudden curse, he followed Perry.

As he reached the ambulance he saw Dr. Fernal on the seat beside the driver. Nancy's face showed beside her father's, bright and alive and eager. Perry, wheeling his horse, clapped his hand to the pistol at his belt and Metzger swung his rifle up, but Warr was too quick for them. Just ahead were the little hills where the signal fire had burned that morning. The

wagons were already in a draw leading into the first of the hills. Warr's voice went up, a voice trained to pierce Atlantic storms and bring orders to men high on a mainmast.

"Corral! Corral!" Warr shouted. "Indians! Corral!"

Opposite the ambulance the driver of the first wagon swung his team at that wild shout. Behind him the others turned. For a moment there was indecision and then from the slope of a hill ahead a puff of smoke went up, a rifle cracked and at the feet of the ambulance lead team, a lead slug plowed up sand.

"Corral!" Warr shouted again. "Corral your wagons! *Apaches!*"

Other voices took up the cry. From line of columns the wagons swung out, turning, making a circle, and on the slope other rifles echoed the crack of the first shot while from a draw to the right, a band of savage horsemen came, their stunted ponies running full out, their hands brandishing weapons and their voices shrill and terrible. Warr flung up his rifle, leveled it, and fired. The first of the charging savages pitched down from his horse. Beside the ambulance the sergeant with the escort roared commands. Troopers, drilled and disciplined, deployed and their carbines roared as one. More of the charging savages fell and the others, checking, reined right and left and, like a covey of quail, seemed to disappear into the hills. The all-important time had been gained. The Apache trap had snapped shut but its jaws were empty.

THREE times after the wagons had formed their corral, the Apaches were repulsed. The savage charge washed up to the wagon wheels and broke under the steady, murderous fire of the defenders. After the third charge the Indians withdrew and a seige began. All around the embattled train a ring formed, a death noose, closing in slowly and choking as it closed. Within the hastily formed fort fresh barricades were made from goods unloaded by the wagon men. Flour and bales of cloth, anything that would stop a bullet or an arrow was piled between the wheels, and forming behind the barricade the wagon men fought back against the ever-tightening noose.

Warr Dashiel, a far different man from the desperate fellow who had first ridden to the train, was here and there and everywhere during those first hectic minutes of attack and defense. It was Warr who, when the Apache wave drew close, led the sally that drove it back, and it was Warr who suggested the unloading of the wagons and making a barricade of the goods. As the afternoon waned and the attacks lessened and became a grim seige, Warr met with Brown, the train captain, Doctor Fernal, Perry and other leaders to determine what should be done.

The condition of the train was desperate. There was very little water, for only a few of the wagoneers had filled their barrels, depending on Metzger's assurance that they would camp at water before nightfall. Some of the mules had been killed and there were other wounded animals. The train people themselves had suffered under the fierce attacks. Thanks to Warr Dashiel they had been partly prepared, but not entirely so, and three of the train men had been killed, some others wounded and one trooper of Perry's little escort was dead.

"What will we do now?" Brown demanded, looking at Warr. "They got a ring around us. They got us held here."

"We've got to wait," Warr counseled. "Havasu has gone to Fort Defiance. He'll bring the troops to relieve us. All we can do is hold our ground and wait for that."

Brown seemed satisfied, but Perry snarled an objection. "They're drawing off. I say that we can go on and reach water."

"They've not drawn off," Warr answered. "They're simply quiet, waiting for us to make a mistake. I tell you that we saw at least two hundred of them this morning. They're all around us. We'll stay here."

"We'll stay here," Brown agreed, and Dr. Fernal nodded his gray head.

With a scowl at Warr, Perry turned and stamped away to where Dutch Metzger and his seven remaining troopers waited. Warr, too, would have left the counsel but Fernal stopped him. "Warr."

Warr turned. The doctor smiled slowly. "We haven't thanked you for bringing us the alarm," he said. "None of us have thanked you. And there is someone who wants to see you, Warr."

"Who?" Warr asked, and then reading the doctor's face, all the weight of hatred and anger and uncertainty was lifted from his shoulders. "Where is she, Doctor?" Warr demanded.

Fernal smiled. "With the wounded."

Warr's eagerness outstripped the doctor's own. He hurried ahead to where, shielded by barrels of flour that had been placed in a rough square, the wounded men were lying. Nancy Fernal straightened from offering a lanky teamster water and, seeing Warr, took one hasty step.

"Nancy!" Just within the improvised barricade Warr stopped. "Nancy!"

For an instant the girl hesitated and then came to him, both hands outstretched. Warr took those small white hands and the last of his bitterness was washed away. Looking down into Nancy's upturned face he read the truth there. Words were wrenched from him.

"Nancy," he stammered. "I . . . Oh, Nancy!"

"You came," Nancy Fernal said slowly. "When we needed you, you came."

Dr. Fernal stepped between the barrels and seeing the two, paused. Warr's voice was hard and choked. "I thought that you loved Perry," he said baldly. "I thought . . . Oh, Nancy, what a fool I've been!"

Nancy's voice was very gentle. "You've been a fool, Warr," she agreed. "You've been a fool from the beginning. You didn't come to me after the courtmartial. You didn't write; I heard nothing. And then at Fort Defiance: I was waiting there to see you that day you came. It was shameless of me, but I waited. I thought that you would come to Major Kennedy's and that we could talk. And again you didn't come. And then after you'd saved me when I had the Yoe children: I thought then that you would surely come. You wouldn't have come now except that I told Father to bring you. Oh, Warr, how much do you expect a girl to do? How could you treat me so?"

Neither saw the good doctor turn away to bend down above a wounded man, and neither saw Walter Perry in his blue uniform pause just beyond the flour barrels.

"Nancy!" Warr choked. "Nancy, will you forgive me?"

Slowly the girl raised her eyes. They held answer enough. Warr's arms reached out, and enfolded the girl. Outside the little barricade Perry turned away, and Doctor Fernal, kneeling now, concentrated all his attention on taking a man's pulse. From the right, rifles popped a desultory challenge as some wagon man saw movement outside the corral, and at the south side of the enclosure another raised his voice.

"See him, Jake? Right thar in that little patch of rock. See him?"

Warr released the girl and stepped back. "I . . ." he said. "I've got to go, Nancy. I can't stay here. I'm needed."

"You must go, Warr," the girl agreed quietly. "But you'll come back."

"I'll always come back, Nancy." Abruptly Warr wheeled and, stepping out between the barrels, was gone. With shining eyes the girl watched him and then, turning, knelt beside her father.

"Bring the water here, Nancy," the doctor ordered. "And my medicine case."

WARR visited each side of the wagon square after he left Nancy. He was not weary any more, nor alarmed, nor concerned regarding the situation. Apparently he paid attention to the men he spoke with and to the defense of the corral, but that was with only half his mind. With the rest he thought of Nancy. Returning from the eastern side of the corral he saw the seven troopers drawn up in a rank and Walter Perry in front of him. Brown came running as Warr approached.

"The lieutenant's goin' to take his men out," the train captain panted. "He's goin' to make a sally. Think it'll work?"

Warr hurried forward. Perry was arguing with Metzger. "You're under my command," he snarled. "You'll take my orders."

"Not if it means gettin' myse'f killed," Metzger rasped. "I ain't goin' out there."

"You coward!"

"I ain't a fool."

Perry wheeled away from the scout. "We can drive them off, men," he said, addressing the troopers. "There's not many of them and they're cowards. One charge will be enough."

Warr, reaching Perry's side, spoke low

voiced and hastily. "You aren't going out of the corral? You aren't going to try that?"

Perry's eyes were cold and hard and his face was twisted into a hard mask. "I'm in command," he snarled. "I know what I'm doing."

"But you can't!" Warr still kept his voice low, trying to avoid quarreling with Perry before the troopers. "It's crazy. You'll be cut off. Think of the men if you don't think of yourself. You'll . . ."

Perry held his big dragoon Colt in his hand. He struck with it, one vicious, swinging blow that met Warr's head and sent him sprawling back, not unconscious but momentarily stunned. Brown and two of the nearest men ran to him and lifted him. For the moment Warr could not move or speak. Lights flashed before his eyes. As they receded and he was able to look again, he saw Perry leading his men out between the wagons. Warr struggled to rise but Brown restrained him; then, seeing that Warr had recovered, helped him to his feet. Perry and the troopers were beyond the wagons. The troopers deployed in a thin line. They were advancing, and cunningly the Apaches let them come. Not a savage showed in advance of the troopers. Staggering, Warr made his way to the wagon and called: "Perry! Come back! Lead your men back!"

The soldiers went on. Grim discipline held them. Not a man of that blue line but believed he was going to his death, and yet they moved steadily toward the mouth of a little draw. They were two hundred yards from the wagons when the Apaches struck. From the rocks on either side and from the rear a murderous fire of rifles and arrows came. Men went down before its first blast and fury and those that remained, reaching the shelter of a pile of boulders, formed back to back to drive off the attack. To the men within the wagon corral it was awe-inspiring and terrible. The Apaches ringed the little boulder heap and from behind the stones the four troopers that had reached shelter drove them back.

"We've got to get them," Warr snapped.

Hastily he set about the task. From the sides of the corral he brought men, as many as could be spared, and posted them along the barricade. Their fire swept a passage to the boulders, kept a little lane clear, a path in which no savage might appear and live. Warr shouted to the men in the boulder pile but apparently they did not hear him. He turned to Brown.

"I'll go out and bring them back!" he snapped, "Keep me covered."

Before Brown could answer he was gone between the wagons and running over the rocky slope. Shouts and guns and arrow fire met him, but miraculously he was untouched. He reached the pile of stone and dropped out of sight.

There were four men in the boulders: Perry, a red haired, freckled trooper, Perry's big Irish sergeant, and one other. Every man was hurt. Warr dropped down beside Perry, panting from his run.

"They'll cover us while we retreat," he gasped. "Brown will give us covering fire. Bring the men back, Perry."

PERRY sighted over the top of his boulder and pulled the trigger of his Colt. "Vera Cruz again," he rasped. "So you've brought the rescue party, Dashiel!"

"Bring the men back, Perry," Warr pleaded. "We can get back to the wagons."

Perry did not even turn. "Sergeant!" he snapped.

The Irishman's voice was stolid. "Sorr?"

"You'll accompany Mr. Dashiel back to the wagons, Sergeant."

"Very good, sorr."

"And Sergeant, I'll not be with you. I intend to stay here."

"You've got to come, Perry," Warr snapped. "You've got to."

"Not I!" Perry looked at Warr steadily. His face was white and his eyes glittered. "Not I, Dashiel! I'll stay here. Sergeant!"

"Sorr?"

"You'll take notice, Sergeant. This is the second time that Mr. Dashiel has come to my rescue. The first time was at Vera Cruz. You'll not understand this, Sergeant, but you're to report to Colonel Cragie. Tell him what I've said. He'll understand. Tell him that Mr. Dashiel has come to my rescue. You'll report, Sergeant?"

"I'll report, sorr."

"If you get through." Perry laughed bitterly. "I hate your guts, Dashiel.

You've got everything that I never had, everything. If I could kill you and get away I'd do it. But I've made my last mistake. I'll not go back and face a court. And I'll not face Nancy. Good-by, Dashiel, and damn you!"

Before Warr could move to check him, Perry raised from behind his boulder. Twice he fired the big Colt and then the hammer clicked down on a spent cap. From right and left and ahead the Apaches sent their murderous fire and Lieutenant Walter Perry, struck through and through, slumped down behind his boulder.

Outside the rocks the Apaches screamed their triumph and the sergeant's voice was gruff. "He's dead, sorr. We've orders to follow. I misdoubt that we'll make it. Carmichael's bad hurt."

"We'll carry Carmichael," Warr rasped. "And we'll take the lieutenant. They'll give us a covering fire from the wagons. Get ready, Sergeant."

They made their small preparations. The sergeant and the remaining trooper lifted Carmichael between them. Warr picked Perry up in his arms. They crawled to the edge of the boulders and then, rising, ran as best they could toward the wagons two hundred yards away.

EVERY man was hit in that mad journey. Warr, struck along the side by a glancing ball, staggered and almost fell but kept on. The sergeant carried Carmichael, for the other trooper was hit in the leg and could not help with the load. From the wagons a steady, deadly fire kept the Apaches down and, almost at the wagons, Brown and others sprang out to help. Perry was lifted from Warr's arms and Carmichael taken from the sergeant. The wagon men dragged them in and dropped them sprawling behind the barricade so that they might resume their weapons. Side by side Warr and the sergeant lay and the soldier's blue eyes met Warr's.

"We made it, sorr," the sergeant panted. "I niver thought that we would."

"Nor I," Warr grated. "Sergeant, you'll forget what Mr. Perry said. You'll . . ."

"He was my officer, sorr," the sergeant rasped. "I've got his orders."

Then came Doctor Fernal and Nancy to attend the wounds. With Nancy beside him Warr forgot the sergeant.

All afternoon the fight dragged on. Warr was on his feet as soon as he had recovered his breath from his mad dash. The Apaches, contrary to their usual custom, did not give up, but maintained their ring about the embattled wagons. It was a war of attrition, a stubborn, endless thing that dragged along. As dusk came the Indians charged again and were driven back. It was after that charge that Warr and Brown and Doctor Fernal met together to consult.

"We cain't hold out," Brown said gloomily. "They're goin' to take us. We jest ain't goin' to last till the troops git here—if they do git here."

"If we could get help from the survey camp," Fernal said doubtfully, "perhaps we could last out until the troops come. If Beale and his men . . ."

"Where are they?" Warr asked quietly.

"About twenty miles east," the doctor answered. "I'm inclined to think that your friend didn't get through to the fort, Warr. I believe that the Apaches caught him. Cragie would have moved immediately if he had received word of our predicament."

Warr sat thinking. "I'll get through to Beale," he said suddenly. "If I reach him he'll send word to the fort and he'll come himself.

"No, Warr!" The doctor put his hand on Warr's arm. "You can't."

"I can!" Warr snapped. "I'll take Perry's horse and make a run for it. I can get through."

Reading the determination on Warr's face, Doctor Fernal said no more. Brown was nodding slowly, and the sergeant's face held no expression. Warr spoke to Fernal again.

"If you'll get the horse ready," he said. "I want a word with Nancy before I go."

Turning, he strode away from the group. For an instant it seemed that the doctor would follow and then he spoke to the sergeant. "You'll help me with the horse?"

When Warr returned, his eyes were bright beneath the bandage worn turbanwise around his head, and he walked with a spring, not like a weary, wounded man. The big horse was ready and while the

sergeant stood by the charger's head, Warr mounted.

"I'll make it through to Beale," he said. "We'll have help by morning." Reaching down he gripped first Brown's hand and then the doctor's. The sergeant freed the charger's head. An opening had been made between the wagons and with a bound the horse leaped toward it. Warr lifted his hand and then was through the opening and sweeping out across the draw. Shouts went up and rifles crashed and savage bowmen arose from their places of concealment; but the big horse never faltered in its stride, and Warr's yell, high and buoyant, came floating back.

"He'll make it," Brown said slowly. "He's shore to make it."

"Father."

Doctor Fernal turned. Nancy was beside him, her face alight with her pride.

"What is it, Nancy?"

The girl's face sobered. "The red-headed soldier is dying, I think," she said. "He wants you. He says that there is something he must tell you."

The doctor put his arm around his daughter's shoulders. "I'll come," he answered. "And Nancy, Warr's clear of them. He's through and he'll bring help."

AT Beale's camp Cox'un Bill Peck completed his midnight inspection of the watch. As was his custom, having made his rounds, he stopped in front of his commander's tent and spoke softly.

"Eight bells an' all's well, sir."

As was custom, too, Beale answered. "Very well, Cox'un."

Bill Peck turned and started toward his own tent, progressing a half dozen steps when a sentry's challenge cut the night. "Halt! Halt there!"

Bill Peck ran toward the sentry and behind him he heard Beale leave his tent and follow.

The sentry stood outlined darkly against the skyline and beyond the sentinel a weary horse stood wide legged and hung his head. As Peck arrived he heard a familiar voice, filled now with desperation. Peck's own voice was lifted.

"Mr. Dashiel? It's never you!"

"Cox'un!"

It was Beale who answered, Beale in slippers and hastily donned trousers, pulling up beside Bill Peck. "Dashiel? What in the world, man?"

"The wagon train," Warr Dashiel answered. "The Apaches have attacked them. I've come for help."

Beale and Peck ran forward side by side. They caught Warr Dashiel by either arm and led him back toward the tents. Over his shoulder Beale flung an order to the sentry. "Bring that horse in."

In Beale's tent, with a candle lantern glowing on the table, they sat Warr Dashiel down. Brandy warmed and strengthened him and he stared at Beale's stern face as he told his story. "So," Warr completed, "I came to you. You've got to send word to the fort and you've got to help them, Beale."

For just an instant Beale stood quiet. Then: "Rouse out the men, Cox'un," he commanded. "Of course we'll help them."

Outside the tent Bill Peck's voice rang stentoriously: "Rise and shine. Roust out, you men. All hands!"

"We'll leave a guard," Beale stated. "We'll take the horses and mules. It can't be more than twenty miles. We'll send a message to Fort Defiance and . . ."

"Not just the mules," Warr interrupted. "The camels. The Apaches have never seen a camel. They're mounted and you know how horses act when they see a camel. Beale . . ."

Beale was already at the tent door calling. "Hadji Ali. Pass the word for Hadji Ali."

All along the line of tents where sleepy men scrambled into clothing, the word rang out. "Pass the word for Hadji Ali. The commander wants him. Pass the word!"

At the tent door Beale turned back to Warr. There was no indecision about Edward Beale, nothing but strength on his stern face. A Naval officer, still Beale knew the desert, none better. He had traversed it with Kit Carson, carrying dispatches from Kearney in California, and he had taken many a lesson from that master strategist and scout.

"Now where are they, Mr. Dashiel?" he demanded. "What is the exact situation?"

In the wagon corral, with night drawing to an end, weary men rested on their arms and peered out between spokes

or over improvised breastworks at the silent slopes about them. Above them the stars grew dim with coming light. Soon, too soon, the dawn would break across the east and with the dawn would come attack. They waited for it.

Within the shelter of the flour barrels, Nancy Fernal sat beside her father, the doctor's arm comfortingly about her waist. Now and again a wounded man moaned softly, but for the rest, the night was still. Even the wagon mules and the loose stock within the enclosure seemed to feel the depression and the tension. The doctor moved gently.

"I have a little pistol, Nancy," he said gently. "I want to give it to you. I had hoped. . . . Here, my dear." He pressed cold metal into his daughter's hand.

Nancy's voice was steady. "Thank you, Father, but there's no need. Warr will come. I'll not need your pistol."

The doctor sighed. "I think . . ." he began.

Light streaked the east. Into a cloudless sky the rising sun poured its first beginning and with the light the Apaches came. They came from rocks and slopes, from little tufts of grass that would not hide a quail. They came savagely, bent close to the earth, in one last, final charge that would not be denied; and as they came they shrieked their war whoops, while arrows hissed and guns banged their fury.

Inside the corral of wagons the weary riflemen, few now, met that screaming menace. A steady ring of flame blossomed about the wagons as men fired mechanically and, in mad haste, re-charged their rifles or snatched up loaded pieces to fire. The savage wave came on, washing up against the wagons, a ferocious, terrible tide that would not be denied. On it came, and on.

AND then, at the outer rim of that tide a man shrieked sheer terror and then another and another, and against the corral the wave broke and washed back, savagery turned to terror, blood lust to panic. For, from the east, silhouetted against the sunrise, came specters, great, gaunt, humped shapes that covered yards at a stride, unbelievable apparitions in the Arizona desert.

Now from those striding beasts, rifles began to speak, adding to the fire from the wagons. From the wagon men a deep throated shout went up, and before the fire and that fierce shout, struck by terror at what they saw, horses frightened and stampeding, the Apaches broke and ran.

The wagon men swarmed out from their barricade to meet these newcomers, but swifter than the men, Nancy Fernal ran toward them also. One great, gaunt, single humped beast halted. From the neck of Madhi, the dromedary, Warr Dashiel slipped down and ran to meet the girl. And as they met, with the sun rising, silver clear, from the east a trumpet call floated, faint and silver clear. Beale, striding forward to join Warr and Nancy, stopped and listened and amidst the wagon men someone shouted that thing that they all knew.

"The soldiers! They're comin' from Fort Defiance!"

The sun had climbed well over the horizon when the troops arrived. Colonel Cragie, leading them, lifted his hand for the halt and then with Yoe and Kennedy following, spurred on to meet the men who strode out from the wagon corral. Another man rode with Cragie but before the parties met, he swung off to the right and stopping beside a man and woman who stood alone, dismounted. There was a bandage around Havasu's head and his left arm was in a sling, but the grin that split his beard was dauntless.

"Looks like you got yere in time, Warr," he drawled. "Looks like you got whut you come for, too."

Warr could not answer, and Havasu continued. "I had a mite of trouble gettin' to the fort. Met some 'Paches an' had a little fight. I was worried, but it looks like you done all right."

Warr's hand clasped his friend's and still he could not find words. It was Nancy who answered Havasu.

"He came in time and he brought Mr. Beale and his men. And . . ."

"Yeah," Havasu drawled. "Warr's a right good boy. But there ain't no need of me tellin' *you* that."

Cragie, reaching the men who came toward him, reined in his horse. There was surprise on his face when he spoke.

"Well, Mr. Beale. I didn't expect to find you here."

Beale, smiling, reached up to grasp Cragie's hand. "Trust the Navy, Colonel," he answered. "We always turn up when and where we're needed."

Behind Cragie, hawkfaced Captain Yoe cracked the first and only joke of his career. Yoe had seen the camels and his voice was dry and rasping as he spoke.

"They used ships of the desert, Colonel Cragie."

The men laughed, more from relief than because of Yoe's words.

Cragie dismounted. His questions were brief and pointed and within minutes, knowing what he wished to know, he sent Kennedy and Yoe trotting back to the waiting dragoons. The troop would pursue and punish the Apaches, dispersing them and hunting them down. Leading his horse, with Beale on one side, and Brown, the train captain, on the other, the colonel walked toward the wagons.

Half a troop of dragoons trotted forward from where they had halted, and the rest, following Yoe and Kennedy, swung off toward the north.

Just outside the circle of wagons the colonel halted, waiting for his men to come up. Doctor Fernal came between the wagons and joined the men in time to hear Cragie's words.

"I couldn't believe Havasu Simms at first. I knew that there had been a minor raid, of course, and that Perry had followed and punished the Indians; but I couldn't believe that they had come out to raid in force. There was no reason for it."

"There was a reason, Colonel."

The men turned to look at Doctor Fernal. The doctor's voice was quiet. "Chee's braves didn't steal Lieutenant Perry's horses. I had it all from Carmichael, Lieutenant Perry's striker, before he died. Perry was not satisfied with inaction. He wanted to be sent against the Apaches. He and Carmichael and Metzger plotted together. Metzger and Carmichael hid the horses that were supposedly stolen. Metzger led Perry's patrol to Chee's winter camp, and they attacked. That's why the Indians joined and why they attacked the train. They wanted revenge."

For a long moment Cragie stood stock still. Then his voice rasped: "Where is Perry?"

"Dead," Doctor Fernal answered slowly, "and so is Carmichael. But Metzger is here. He tried to run when the attack broke this morning. We caught him and held him for you."

"An'," Brown added, dryly, "it's goin' to be all I c'n do to keep my men from hangin' Metzger, once they find out what he done."

"We'll attend to that detail, Mr. Brown," the colonel snapped. "Both the prevention and the hanging. You said that Lieutenant Perry. . . ."

"Mr. Perry led his escort out of the corral, Colonel," Doctor Fernal said. "He was killed. Mr. Dashiel went out to bring them in. There is one trooper and the sergeant left living from the escort. Perhaps. . . ."

Fernal broke off. Limping, bandaged, but a figure of a fighting man, the big Irish sergeant of the escort came from between the wagons. He drew himself up and saluted, and his weary voice rasped:

"Sergeant Halloran reportin', sorr, as ordered by Lieutenant Perry. If the Colonel plaze . . ."

OUT beyond the wagons Warr Dashiel spoke to Havasu Simms, Warr Dashiel who would be Beale's second in command on the survey to California; Warr Dashiel, whose courtmartial, reviewed by a Navy board and with new evidence presented, would some day sign his name with the words, "Commander, U. S. N." Warr Dashiel, half owner of a mine in Caliente Canyon.

"We'd better go to the wagons, Havasu."

"Why shore," agreed Havasu, and fumbled in his buckskin pouch for his chewing. "Yeah. We'd better go. I wonder if Bill Peck's outa chewin', too."

Warr did not hear Havasu's words. His arm was around Nancy Fernal as they walked toward the wagons.

TARANTULA BRAND

By GEORGE BRYDGES RODNEY

The nameless terror of the Black Hills waged one-man war, cheating death itself to sear a fearful brand of savage justice on maurauding Utes.

FRESH from seven months in the Black Hills, Loyal Smith and his gray-bearded old partner, Hondo Sykes, sought refreshment in the Fort Laramie bar. Hondo cleared a way through the trappers and blanket-men and came face to face with the Head that lowered at him from the end of the counter. A crackling oath burst from him like the snap of a lightning flash.

"What damned fool killed that man?" he demanded. "That's White Tail of the Pah Utes! Whoever killed him has brung the Tribes down on us again."

Loyal bent over Hondo's arm and scanned the horrible trophy. It was mottled with spots of black and white paint and in the center of the forehead stood out a huge black blister as big as a silver dollar, from which a dozen wavy spidery lines radiated across the face.

"That the Tarantula's Mark," said Hondo sharply. "Whoever killed him has raised hell for all of us. After this, every dang Pah Ute in the western country'll be down on the emigrant trains. Every wagon that rolls out of Laramie 'll pay toll. If all our trappin' parties come back half strength we kin thank the Tarantula. Where'd it come from?"

"I brung it in," a blanket-man said, thrusting forward. "I found it on a grave scaffold four days to the west. Sure, the Tarantula done it. Who the devil is he, anyhow?"

"Nobody knows who he is," said Hondo. "I never seen a man who seen him. I only know his work. He always brands his dead that way. Every time we patch up a truce with the Pah Utes this damn Tarantula comes along and busts it up. In the last two years he's done more harm to us prospectors an' trappers than any Indian agent out o' Washington. I'm plumb glad I'm headin' for Fort Supply."

At a touch on the arm he turned his gaze on a white-faced man who trembled from head to foot.

"D' you say you're goin' to Fort Supply?" he asked.

"Yep. Me an' my partner's startin' at daylight. Why?"

"My name's Stipe. Ben Stipe," said the man. "We left Iowa City with four other wagons, headin' fer Californy. When we'd been a week on the trail my wife took down with scarlet fever. We had our kid with us . . . Mabel . . . she's five years old. If she'd stayed with us she'd have got the fever so Mis' Peters took her on in their wagon. They was to wait here for us. When we got here I found Peters went on. I got to ketch him. My Lord, stranger, if I don't ketch him, we'll lose the kid, see?" He appealed to Loyal.

"Of course I see." Loyal's tone was all sympathy. "What kind of an outfit have you got?"

"A Conestoga wagon an' eight oxen."

Hondo Sykes shook his head and Loyal Smith looked grave. Hondo stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I'd say 'yes' in a minute," he said, "if it wasn't for that head of White Tail, the Pah Ute chief, with the Tarantula's mark on it. From now on every Pah Ute'll be on the war path. It'll cost us our hair to travel with an ox train that makes only eight miles a day. You swap them oxen fer mules that kin make twenty miles a day an' I'll agree. Make your deal with Jerry here." He jerked a hand at the waiting bartender. "He kin fix you up. We hit the trail at daylight."

Stipe immediately closed a deal for four mules and hurried back to his camp where his wife met him with an anxious face. She had heard the news.

"I got it all fixed, Susie," he said. "We break trail with two trappers for Supply at daylight. I've made a deal for four mules. We got to catch Peters if we aim

The man with the buckskin mask struggled and sat up. "The Injun don't live who can kill me," he rasped.

to get Mabel back an' we can't overtake him with oxen."

He loosed the oxen and was back in an hour with four mules. He tied them securely to the wagon tongue and gave them a little salt to bribe them into quiet during the night.

Stipe was already hitching in his team when Hondo and Loyal rode into his camp. The sun was barely up when they broke camp, crossed the creek and headed west. They covered twenty miles that day and camped at Willow Branch.

"Hobble them mules," said Hondo sharply as Stipe turned his stock loose to graze. "If they're loose, you won't have one in the mornin'. Nothin' but dry wood tonight. This is Indian country. Wet wood means black smoke an' black smoke means a white man's fire. We'll have frost tonight."

Mrs. Stipe laughed. She knew better—but when morning came the grass was covered with a heavy frost. That second day was worse than the first. They never saw the sun and a cold wind blowing in their faces pulled down their rate of travel. After that, day succeeded day of cruel, unending labor. Bitter Cottonwood and Big Timber tailed away behind them. Traveling alone with an ox team, Ben Stipe would never have made that crossing over those windy levels. Even John Peters with four wagons and all the men he needed had troubles that Stipe missed.

PETERS had waited at Laramie longer than was wise. He waited, hoping Stipe would catch up, but Stipe never did. Finally when Peters had spent nearly all his money on supplies and could stay no longer, he left and took little Mabel with him.

"Lord knows when an' where Stipe'll git her back," he said. "But we can't leave her at Laramie. She's got to go on with us."

Eight, ten, and very rarely, twelve miles a day Peter's heavy-shouldered oxen wrestled the heavy wagons along the trail. That grassy sea stretched for miles with never a tree to break the monotony of its windy floor. When they found there was little water, the animals got first chance at the water barrels.

"Look at that," Peters pointed to an ox thrashing in the agonies of water colic. "That's the second one to go. Devil knows how we'll ever cross Snake River if any more die."

"There's the end of the grass," Elton pointed westward. "What the devil has happened here?"

Any plainsman could have told them the story that ground held but they were not plainsmen. They were farmers and the Book of the Plains was sealed to them. At the bottom of the slope the soft earth was chewed as though done with teeth. Even the low brush and bushes had been mashed flat as though done with a huge roller. A buffalo herd had done that in passing.

Red dawn touched the grassy sea and the lowing oxen were herded into camp. A trickle of black smoke, that no plainsman would ever have permitted, oozed up into the still air. Something in that air set the uneasy oxen to stamping and milling and their nervous lowing went up in bursts of steam.

"I wonder what ails 'em," said Peters anxiously. "Look at Red."

The great steer was shouldering his yoke mate about the wagon tongue, lowing mournfully from time to time. A flight of birds passed over them; then with a quick rush, a herd of antelopes crossed the trail, their white-dashed rumps showing like cut paper patterns as they leaped the grass clumps.

"I'd almost swear there's somethin' in the air," growled Elton. "How about you, Pete?"

Peters did feel something but to save his soul he could not define it. He could not account for the tense nervousness that made his muscles jerk and quiver. That trail that had been singularly devoid of life was alive. Rabbits ran crazily along the track; quail passed high overhead. Sandhill cranes craked their way into the windy sky and a flight of ravens, sure harbingers of trouble if the men had but known it, swung over them. Still the oxen stood uneasily with cracking nostrils and heads pointed up-wind.

"Smell that?" Mrs. Peters leaned forward from her seat on the lead wagon. "That's smoke, John."

Peters sniffed up-wind like a setter dog. On the dawn wind there was an undeni-

able smoke reek. The prairie was afire to the south! Peters galvanized into instant life and yoked his unruly team. There was but one horse with the wagons. Peters shouted to Elton:

"Ride to that western ridge, Sam, an' see if there's any sign of water beyond it. If we're caught here, we're done for."

Elton rode belly-to-earth and before the teams had gone a hundred yards he was waving his hat from the ridge screst.

"Stream bed three miles westward," he shouted. "But the fire's closer'n that. Look!"

He jerked a hand to the south where a shifting line of leaping flames sprang out of the tall grass. Above those tongues lay a blanket of light smoke and the crackle and smell of the fire came to them with a reek of dead grass and damp smoke. Frenzied proddings with sharpened goads urged the animals to top speed. Inch by inch the frenzied drivers prayed and prodded till at last the reluctant teams caught the danger smell and needed no further urging. At last they won the line of the sandy foothills but the wagon covers were afire, and not a man or woman but had face and hands blackened and blistered. They dropped among their teams that were held erect by their heavy yokes.

"Get 'em some water from the creek," croaked Peters. "Heaven knows they've earned it. What ails you, Mabel?" he demanded testily. Mabel Stipe had climbed to the wagon box and was staring off to the line of smoke behind them.

"There're men back there, Daddy Peters. There's men in the smoke." Her voice shrilled high above the lowing of the teams and the low-voiced men. Peters leaped for the wheel.

"Let me see! Men!"

The next minute he was running to the head of his team and prodded his lead team till they bellowed in pain.

"By hell!" he shouted. "It's Indians! We've got to get to the creek bed. All together now! We can't make a stand here where we have no water. We may do it at the creek. Look at the devils ride."

A wave of ponies swept over the ridge behind and drove down upon them in a crazy mass of blacks and bays and grays and duns. Their riders were naked save for leggins and breech-clouts and bent low over their horses' necks and the tufts on their lances blew out in colored plumes. Down they came in a maddened storm that seemed about to close as the leading wagon lurched over the crest and rocketed drunkenly toward the ford. Instantly the riders divided and swept up on each side of the wagons and formed for the "ring attack," and a cloud of arrows hissed into the melee of swearing men and snorting cattle.

Peters jammed down his brakes, seized his rifle and fairly hurled his wife and Mabel under the wagon. His rifle cracked as he followed them, striving to reload. His wife filled his mouth with bullets and he hurriedly poured home a charge of powder. But that shot was never fired. A long arrow hissed between the spokes and feathered in his neck. He rolled over and two warriors dragged him out by the feet and struck him on the head with a stone ax.

The other wagons fared no better. Of the four that raced so madly for the creek banks, only one reached the water. Each team was surrounded by a crowd of crazy-eyed warriors, eager to finish what they had begun.

As that leading wagon rocketed down the hill to the ford a puff of white smoke shot up like a plume from the willow copse and a warrior rolled from his pony. A second shot brought down a screaming stallion and a dozen men dashed for the copse where the white smoke still hung. What took place in that tangle of small brush and low trees no man of that train ever saw. They died among the cattle with their women and when the wagons had been looted and fired, the attackers drew off to take account of stock while the smoke of the burning Conestoga wagons swirled and swung among the gnarled low trees.

A FULL day's travel behind Peters' wagons, Ben Stipe urged his tired mules to overtake the train, for they must be overtaken before they came to the Snake River crossing. The fresh tracks and a dozen other signs told that they were not far behind. It was full noon when Stipe halted his wagon on the crest of the ridge

from which John Peters had sighted the fire to the south.

The stretch of burned grass lay like a dark blanket, through which occasional white stones pricked like milestones. Hondo lurched out of saddle.

"Wait a bit," he cautioned. "Been a fresh fire here. The ground's too hot yet fer mules' feet. They kin pass over it in a half hour. Le' me take a look over there."

His pony stood with hanging reins while Hondo worked his way down the slope. From time to time he stopped to rake aside the ashes and examine the hard-packed earth beneath.

"A buffalo herd passed here," he said crisply. "The fire was started by Indians to the south to run the herd from the beddin' grounds. They was drivin' the herd north fer a big killin'. The wagons crossed here before the fire."

"How can you tell that?" demanded Stipe incredulously.

"The wheel tracks is all under the ashes. Anybody kin see that. Come on. We'll find the wheel tracks on the hill yonder."

The wagon plodded on, the restive mules stepping gingerly among the red-hot mounds of earth. At the far edge of the burned tract where the ashes ran out in scattered grass clumps, they saw Hondo bend over and suddenly spring erect.

"Come over here. Barefoot ponies went here." He pointed to the tracks of unshod hoofs. "By hell," he muttered to Loyal, "I'm plumb afeard of what we'll see beyond the ridge."

He leaped into saddle and raced up the slope. They saw him pause at the crest; then he leaned forward in his saddle and stared ahead of him. The next moment he was riding hell-for-leather down the far slope, regardless of the toiling wagon that creaked and rocked up the hill behind him.

An indefinable sense of disaster fell like a shroud on Stipe. His breath came in short gasps and his face was bathed in cold sweat as he came to the top of the slope and the full horror of the scene lay before him. He saw Hondo bending over a heap of ashes and he heard himself saying to his wife:

"Keep back in the wagon, Susie. There's things here that you mustn't see."

But she had already seen. "Oh, my God!" she wailed and looked again. What had happened was written in red.

That leading wagon had entered the ford where it was forty yards wide and shoulder deep. The leading team balked at the swift water and the teams behind piled up on the first. The last two had been pocketed by the high banks. The range was so short that the arrows had gone clean through the cattle and two dead oxen, still yoked together, lay on the far side of the stream. The oxen, slaughtered in their yokes, were as full of arrows as a pin cushion is of pins. The body of one man was pinned to the jockey-box with two arrows through his throat. In the very act of leaping from his seat he had been impaled and died like a bug on a pin. A second man lay between two oxen; a broken lance in his body showed the manner of his death. The three women of the train had found a merciful death in the long grass by the trail.

Hondo wiped his face. "I don't see no sign Stipe's little girl. If they caught her, I don't see why they didn't kill her. There's no place she could 'a' hid."

"What's that over there?" Loyal pointed to a clump of small trees across the stream where a dozen great buzzards hopped about in the scrub. "Wait for me here," he said.

He spurred his pony across the stream with Hondo at his heels and both men stopped as though petrified. Before their startled eyes lay the prone body of a man with a long arrow feathered in the left arm. Loyal promptly broke the shaft and drew it through the arm.

"That arrow never killed him," he said grimly. "Here's what did it." He pointed to a long gash on the left side of the head. The mark of a stone ax. "Wait till I turn him over."

HE laid the body face up on some leaves and both men started back in astonishment. The man had been scalped years before and the horrible cicatrice was hard and brown. But that was not all! Covering the upper part of the face, a buckskin bandage was stretched across the eyes, hiding them. Below that bandage they saw a tangle of brown beard and a mouth that was tense and drawn. Loyal

lifted the bandage and turned away sick and faint at what he saw.

"He's still alive," said Hondo. "Git some water. I'm afeared he's a goner though."

"You're a liar." The man with the buckskin mask struggled and sat up coughing and gulping.

"The Injun don't live who can kill me," he rasped.

"Looks like you're right, old timer," grunted Hondo. The two men stared at him in disbelief. A trickle of blood was running down the side of the man's head and they noted two tiny holes in the bandages where the eyes should have been. "Who the hell are you?" demanded Hondo shortly.

"What difference does it make. Got any whiskey?" He snatched at Loyal's flask, gulped noisily as a horse drinks and shook the flask. "Now I kin talk. Did they wipe out all the men with the wagons?"

"They killed every human bein'," said Loyal.

The man shook his head. "No," he said. "One wasn't killed. There was a li'l' girl with yaller hair. They didn't kill her, I saw her pulled offen the wagon. They carried her off, I tell you. I was campin' in the brush waitin' for a shot at a buffalo when the wagon came over the ridge. I did what I could before they got me. I got two, but neither of 'em was the man I wanted."

"The man you wanted?" Both men said it almost together.

"I don't see why they didn't kill you," said Loyal.

"They done their damnedest. When it came to scalpin' me that was different. Even a Pah Ute can't scalp a man but once. They scalped me eight years ago . . . alive!"

"In Hell's name who did *that?*" Loyal pointed to the bandage.

"In Hell's name nobody did it. But it was White Tail of the Pah Utes. That was why I killed him. But he got off easy. I put my brand on him while he was still livin' though."

"Good Lord, man! Are you the man men call the Tarantula?"

"Some people call me that," said the man curtly. "Give me a hand and let's go to your wagon."

THEY found Stipe almost prostrated. His wife had mercifully fainted, but she recovered to hear low-voiced talk by the wagon.

"I tell you. . . ." The husky voice was strange to her. . . . "I tell you I saw her carried off. A warrior on a painted pony swung the child off the wagon and rode off with her. . . . No! They won't kill her. If they meant to kill her, they'd have done it right away while the blood lust was on 'em. She's too tiny to give 'em pleasure in the torture. They've carried her off."

"Good Heaven, man! That's worse'n any death," said Stipe brokenly.

"Think so?" said the man. "Wait till you've tried it. But it'll be plain hell fer you lessen you git her back. What d'you mean to do?"

"I . . . I don't know. I can't think," groaned Stipe.

"I'll think for you," said Loyal. "It's a cinch somebody's got to. Listen, Stipe! Of course, we've got to git the kid back but you can't go with us. We can't trail through the Indian country with a mule team an' a woman. If your wife goes along, we'll all be bound to lose our scalps in a week."

Hondo and the Tarantula eyed him in silent approval. He went on:

"There's only one thing for you to do, Stipe. You pull out for Fort Supply and stay there till you hear from us. Me an' Hondo'll take the trail. A huntin' party done this. Every arrow was a huntin' arrow. Not a barbed head in the lot. They were drivin' the herd to the north into the land of the Pah Utes. We'll find out what we can. How much powder have you got?"

Stipe told him.

"Give us ten pounds of powder an' some lead and we'll run some extra bullets. We'll leave at once."

"Wait till dark," said the Tarantula quietly.

Loyal shook his head. "We can't see to trail after dark," he said.

"I can," said the Tarantula briefly. "Since they cut my eyelids off I can't stand the sunlight, but I can see like a cat at night. I've got used to it."

"But, man alive! You can't go!"

"Who's to stop me?" demanded the

man truculently. "They thought they fixed me eight years ago but I'm a long way from dead yet. We'll leave as soon as we run them bullets. My pony's west of the creek. One of you all go get him."

Stipe got the pony while the others ran the bullets. When the rude grave had been filled in, Stipe climbed heavily to his seat and urged his reluctant team along the trail. Then Loyal turned to his companions.

"Of course, we all know," he said, "that to follow a party of the Pah Utes into their own country is like pullin' the very whiskers of Death."

"Death plays a fair game," said the Tarantula. "But you got to watch the cards. I know 'cause I've played it."

"I'd like to know who the devil you are," said Loyal sharply.

"What difference does that make? I can trail an' cook an' fight an' I can see in the dark like any cat. Beside that I've got a score of nigh ten years to pay off against the Pah Utes. Suit you?"

"It suits me fine," said Hondo briefly. "Let's hit the trail."

They followed that trail for four days. The fire had burned itself out at the first creek crossing and from there on the hunting party, harrying the flying herd, traveled slowly and its tracks were easily followed. The white men traveled by night and hid by day till finally they raised the blue blur of the Bois d'Arc range that stretches northwestward like a Continental Divide. It was nearly midnight when they sighted it and a young moon was riding high.

"There's their village. Hear that!" The Tarantula jerked a hand toward the misty horizon.

The soul-wrenching wail of coyotes rose to the stars and was answered by a deeper yelping that carried a note of eery challenge that chilled the blood.

"Indian dogs in the village." The Tarantula scanned the land from the ridge crest. "Forty lodges! That means a hundred warriors. What now?"

Loyal was frankly puzzled. They could not stay where they were now. Discovery would mean ruin. The first Indian woman coming to the creek for water would discover them. They found cover up-stream where the creek banks changed into rocky walls of a canyon. A quarter mile up that canyon they picketed their ponies and took cover among the boulders in the creek bed. Loyal turned to the Tarantula.

"This is your hand," he said. "What do you lead?"

"An ace." The Tarantula grinned under his bandage. "The girl's there all right. She can't be anywhere else. If they'd killed her we'd have found her body on the trail. She's in that village an' she belongs to the biggest man in the place. Since I killed White Tail the biggest man in the Pah Ute village is Bent Lance. He's one of their war chiefs. Wait an' see what turns up."

They waited all day in that hot coulee among the rocks and it was not till dusk that their opportunity came.

ORDINARILY Bent Lance, the war chief of the Pah Utes, would have paid no attention to the clamorings of his eight-year-old son but tonight that son had showed his first sign of warrior blood. All afternoon he had been playing with his father's great war bow and had bent it at least an inch. Bent Lance gave a grunt of approval, drew his son to him and felt his muscles. Then he gave another grunt and pushed aside two little girls who were striving to get the attention of a third—a white girl lying flat on her face on a pile of skins with her face buried in a newly stripped antelope hide.

Even after five days' rest Mabel Stipe was completely exhausted. Terrified beyond measure when she was snatched from the burning wagon, she had no clear idea of all that had happened. Bent Lance had not been unkind to her. She was very precious in his eyes for she represented potential wealth. If he could ever approach the white men on the subject he could get for her many ponies and guns.

Bent Lance gave her a casual glance as he thrust his son out of the lodge before him. When the boy saw his father pick up a bow his eyes lighted. That meant that they would go to the old beaver dam in the stream and perhaps get a shot at a beaver.

Bent Lance lead the way to the creek and handed the bow to his son.

"Bend it," he said.

The youngster drew the string half-way to his chest. His father grunted approval and lent a hand.

Other eyes were on the boy. In the pile of red sandstone boulders forty yards up-stream three men crouched among the stones watching eagerly. From time to time Hondo Sykes snapped his fingers gently, but Loyal shook his head as one does at the ceaseless buzzing of a fly. The Tarantula wormed his way forward till his lips were at Loyal's ear.

"I'll use my lariat," he whispered. "It's our best chance. It's Bent Lance! Their biggest war chief! Next to White Tail and Lame Bear, he's the man I want of all others! I'll rope him but you'll have to grab the boy and see that he doesn't give the alarm. If he gets away he'll bring the whole village down on us. Send Hondo back to have the horses ready. If we win we'll need 'em. If we lose, we'll need 'em still worse."

Loyal explained in a tense whisper and Hondo faded away among the brush. Loyal tightened his belt, saw his knife lay loose in its sheath, and crept noiselessly after the Tarantula. Once he started a tiny landslide that sounded in his ears like an avalanche, but Bent Lance never raised his eyes. There could be no danger to him in the center of his people in their own country.

The Tarantula crept snake-like through the low brush till he got within a short ten feet of the unsuspecting pair. He deftly uncoiled his lariat and slipped the metal hondo up the shank of the rope, making a small loop that would not catch in the brush. He could take no chances now. One miss would ruin all his plans. Closer he crept and closer till Loyal wondered if he would never stop. Suddenly Bent Lance raised his head. The Tarantula rose quickly to his full height and threw!

That tiny loop cut the air like a metal disc and settled about Bent Lance's throat with the certainty of fate. The moment it landed, the Tarantula jerked and settled back on his heels and Bent Lance without even a grunt, went over on his back with the wind jerked out of him. A yell was stifled in his throat.

Instantly, Loyal leaped forward and seized the boy, stifling his shouts by holding his face hard against his breast till he got a paw across the gasping mouth.

Long before Loyal got the boy silenced, the Tarantula lashed Bent Lance's hands behind him with a piece of his lariat and gagged him with a bit of stick lashed across his mouth. Then he picked him up and with no gentle hand forced him, struggling violently, across the stream and up the canyon to where Hondo stood among the horses.

"Got him, eh? That's good." Hondo eyed his prisoner as if he were some prehistoric monster, but the Tarantula's face was a study. His eyes shone even through the little holes in the dirty buckskin bandage and his mouth worked in a way that there was no mistaking.

"Go on," said Loyal softly. "It's yore game. Play her as she lays."

THE TARANTULA did. He thrust his snarling face within inches of the face of the startled chief.

"The Pah Utes sleep like the porcupine," he growled menacingly. "Do they think white men sleep on the trail when the Pah Utes have killed their cattle and murdered their young men and women? I have come for the child that you brought from the south."

Bent Lance grunted. The gag prevented speech.

"You will send the boy to bring her," said the white man. "He will bring her to me."

Bent Lance's face lit. If the boy went to the camp for the girl he would give the alarm and arouse the village. The Tarantula grinned sardonically and went on:

"The boy's old enough to understand. You tell him that he is to get the girl and bring her here. He will not say a word to anyone of what has taken place. If the village is alarmed, you will die. And you will not die by any ordinary means. See this?"

He tugged at the breast of his shirt and pulled out the iron brand that gave him his name, a great sprawling iron spider with wavy iron legs.

"Does Bent Lance know this?" He thrust the iron brand under the shrinking face of Bent Lance. "White Tail wore that brand before he died." Every syllable in that speech was marked by strong

repression and the lidless eyes glared through the pin holes with malevolent intensity.

Bent Lance's face twitched.

"Does he remember . . . this?"

The Tarantula raised the bandage and Bent Lance shrank back from the blaze of uncontrolled ferocity in the lidless eyes.

"You were with White Tail ten years ago. White Tail was branded with this before he died. In the Spirit World where he has gone his spirit wears forever the brand of the Tarantula. He is forever bound as a slave waiting for his master. He will never again be a warrior. He will water ponies and seek wood. He will wear the dress of a squaw. He will never again see or handle a war bow or a spear. No ponies were killed at his grave! His head bears forever the mark of the Tarantula that sings in the dark. White Tail is a slave forever."

BENT LANCE stared at him wordlessly. According to his own firm belief this was the truth. His people had been taught it for untold generations.

The white man raked some dry wood together as for a fire. "I heat the iron," he said roughly. "If you have anything to say, say it before I put the red iron across your eyes."

Roughly he ripped off the Indian's gag.

Followed a moment's silence. Then:

"Bent Lance will do as the white man says."

"Good! You are very wise. Tell the boy to go to the village and to come back here with the white girl. If the people in the village learn that we are here, I will do as I said. You will bear forever over both eyes the mark of the Tarantula."

He thrust the wondering boy into Bent Lance's arms and sat back while Bent Lance spoke in a low tense whisper to the boy whose little black eyes glistened like the eyes of a trapped squirrel. But he said no word. When Bent Lance stopped talking, Loyal lead the boy down the slope.

"Remember," warned the Tarantula, "if the village is alarmed, your father will be branded. While you are in the village bring back with you a squaw's dress. The child must have some clothes," he explained to Loyal who nodded as he turned away.

The next half hour seemed centuries long till they heard footfalls on the gravel and the boy came at a half run down the slope. He had Mabel by the hand and he almost dragged her off her feet in his haste. Also he struggled with a roll of buckskin under his right arm. He had plainly looted the woman's side of a tepee. Loyal drew them quickly behind the shelter of the rocks.

Mabel's face was pale and dirty and her eyes were rimmed with the red of uncontrolled weeping. Her golden hair was a tangle of knots and burrs and her dress had been torn to shreds. She flung both arms about Loyal's neck and shook with the storm of her sobs. His eyes stung as he picked her up (she was no heavier than a haunch of venison) and strode up the canyon with the boy at his heels. Hondo gave a great sigh of relief but the Tarantula never took his eyes from Bent Lance's face.

"Tighten the cinches on the ponies," he said thickly. "We'll travel far tonight."

"What about Bent Lance?" said Hondo. "Goin' to leave him tied up?"

"Never. He'd find some way to get loose or give the alarm. I've got other plans for him."

"Him an' the boy can't keep up with the horses," objected Hondo.

The Tarantula replaced the gag in Bent Lance's mouth and moved toward the horses.

"You take the girl." He turned to Hondo. "Sykes, take the boy."

"What about Bent Lance?"

"Never mind him. I'm tendin' to him." He seized the chief and dragged him behind a pile of rocks, snatching from the wondering boy the roll of buckskin that he still carried. Five minutes later Bent Lance came from behind the rocks—a changed being. He was dressed in the buckskin skirt of a squaw, his mouth was gagged and his hands were tied behind his back. He struggled and held back but he was no match for the wiry plainsman.

"He's just a squaw," he said. "Look at him." His scornful finger touched the robe. His words cut like knives, for in an Indian camp a woman is only next above a dog. Indeed a dog is more val-

uable for it may be used for food. Without another word the Tarantula settled the loop of his lariat about Bent Lance's neck and tied the shortened rope to his saddle-horn. Then he tied Bent Lance's right arm to his left stirrup-leather.

"You can fall down or hang back an' break your damned neck," he growled. "But you won't get away. And your own son has seen you a prisoner in woman's clothes in an enemy's camp. If that ain't hell for a war chief, I don't know what is. What I've got for you is better than any mere killin'!"

He urged his pony up the rocky path that lead to the summit two thousand feet above them.

For the first hundred yards, Bent Lance seemed paralyzed. Then he tried to struggle. The burning shame of his dress; the ignominy of having been made prisoner in his own village by a blind man, of having been carried off in woman's dress. That was the worst! He knew that ten lifetimes of warrior's valor could never erase the story of his capture and his shame. And he struggled like a crazy man. But each effort was met by a jump of the pony that dragged him off his feet. When this happened twice, the exhausted chief was glad to be allowed to keep his feet on any terms. Tired as the horses were, they made eighteen miles before halting and Hondo pulled up his horse in a clump of aspens on the very summit of the pass.

"They've got to rest," he grunted. "They can't travel two days in one."

"They've got to rest gallopin' then," said the Tarantula. "It's only a question of time till the tribe is on our track. We travel tonight. There is a moon and I can see, if you can't."

Again they took the trail. Loyal carried Mabel and Hondo let the boy down occasionally to rest him but the Tarantula gave Bent Lance no rest. From time to time he gave him a little water but he made him lap it like a dog from his master's hand. Beyond seeing that the rawhide on his hands had not slackened, the white man paid no attention to him.

They passed the valley of the Bent Wood and crossed the great range that flings its rocky challenge to the world from the main divide. At the top of the

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ON SALE AT ALL GOOD NEWSSTANDS!

ridge the Tarantula halted and Bent Lance dropped like a tired dog.

"Over yonder." The white man jerked his chin southwestward. "Another day's travel and we'll be among the foothills. A day beyond that and you can head straight for Fort Supply. We'll turn Bent Lance loose here."

HE cut the thongs that bound him and motioned Bent Lance to rise. He tottered to his feet, a broken man. The spirit that had made him a leader among his people was dead. His eyes were sunken, his face was drawn, but these were but physical reactions. A week of good food and sleep would repair that, but there were other things. For days he had been tied like a dog. For days, dressed in a woman's dress, he had followed the trail of his master. He had drunk like a dog from his master's hand and been glad to get the water. He had been through a period of mental torture greater than any bodily torments that could have been devised. Since his capture he had lived in bodily fear of being branded as White Tail had been branded to slavery throughout all eternity, and those fears had set their stamp on him. It was clear to the white men that Bent Lance would never again lead his tribe in war. The Tarantula spoke:

"I was minded this day to have clapped over your eyes the brand that blinded White Tail, your great war chief, and to let you be led back to your tepee by your son, but this is better. You are a dog and the son of a dog. You have followed at the white man's heels. You have eaten the offal that he threw you. You have lapped water from the hand of your master. You have worn a woman's dress! . . . You are a woman. . . . And your son has seen it! Take your son and go. . . ." He stooped and whispered a word in Bent Lance's ear that made the man cringe and cower; then the Tarantula headed his pony down the slope and followed his friends out upon the plain. The last that Loyal Smith saw of Bent Lance was as he sat huddled in a heap with his face hidden in his hands. Then a turn in the valley hid him and Loyal saw him no more.

Two days' travel took them to the open land of the foothills. That night the Tarantula sat moodily by the greasewood fire paying no attention to the low-voiced talk. Early in the morning Hondo, rounding up the horses, saw him still sitting with his head sunk on his arms. He said nothing till breakfast was over and the ponies saddled. Slipping his hand through his bridle reins, he strode along by Loyal till they came to the edge of the brush.

"There lies your trail, friends." He pointed to the southwest. "Good luck to you on an open trail. Tell Stipe I'm glad we got his girl back. I know what a hell she's been saved from. That's why I did it."

"Get into saddle," said Loyal simply. "We're losin' time."

"I'm goin' back," said the Tarantula grimly. "You don't understand! There were three men! White Tail was one! I got him! Bent Lance—I've broken him! You'll never guess how badly unless you know the Indian better'n I do. There was no need for me to brand him. He's branded himself, or will have done so by the time he reaches his village. He'll live in hell the rest of his life, and die in a worse hell if I know men as I think I do. But the biggest of the three is still loose. When I get him I'm done."

"Get who? What in hell do you mean?"

"Sin-ka-atin . . . Lame Bear. He's the Medicine Man of the Tabaguache clan of the Uncampahgre Utes. He don't live with this last bunch. He lives near the headwaters of the Yellowstone in the Crow country. He's the man I got to get."

Loyal shook him sharply. "You're crazy," he said quickly. "Who and what are you? Why have you started this war with the Utes? Why do men call you the Tarantula?"

"They started that name ten years ago and I got in the habit of usin' it. But I've never lifted a hand against a man except the Utes."

"But . . . why? What have the Utes done to you?"

"I was like that fool Stipe we left back yonder. I started to cross the Great Plains alone. That was in '49; just on the heels of the big gold rush. Lots of people made it but not me. I wouldn't hear to any advice. Like Stipe again! The Army

officers at Fort Leavenworth all told me I couldn't get through by the northern route unless I joined up with a big train but I knew better and I started with my wife. That's why I'm with you now."

"Go on."

"Aye, I'm goin' to! That was the year the Big War started with the Crows and the Pah Utes. I got as far as the foothills all right with little trouble. I had one of the wagons that we called 'mule killers' back in the States and four mules and four months' supplies and I worked our way across the Plains without much trouble, only I had to pay twice for protection from the Crows an' the Osages. Then I came to a creek. I don't know just where it was but it was called Aspen Creek later, I'm told. I'm not quite clear about that time. You see I left my wife in camp while I went into the brush for game for supper. I got lost and was all night in the hills. I was green in those days and could get lost in a dry wash. Well, when I got back to camp next day there were twenty Pah Ute lodges about my camp an' some sixty warriors. It was a huntin' party of the Pah Utes. White Tail was a young man then. He was there an' Sin-ka-atin. . . .Lame Bear . . . and Bent Lance, too. All of 'em young warriors. Like I say they took my camp an'—an' . . . an' my wife was there, alone."

THE two men eyed him stolidly. They had heard of cases like this but they had never actually met with them—of men who had lost all that makes life worth living at one blow. He went on tonelessly.

"They tied me up. They had looted my camp before I came, and I didn't see my wife at first. They staked me out. It was over an ant hill as I knew later. . . . The coyotes gnawed me loose."

"But your wife, man! What happened to her?"

"I'm comin' to that. It don't seem to fit in somehow. I've never been quite clear about that but . . . I . . . saw . . . There were three men, like I said—White Tail, Sin-ka-atin, and Bent Lance and . . . You're plainsmen, an' you know the Horse Indians. I've never been able to forget."

"What became of her?"

"You know the Horse Indians." He moved restlessly. "You know they never spare any white woman who falls into their hands. And I saw . . ."

Hondo let go a gusty oath and straightened up to his full height.

"Give me half your powder," said the man. "You'll be in Fort Supply before you need more. You travel on an open trail but my way lies back there." He pointed along the track by which they had come.

Wordlessly the two men divided powder and lead and forced on him most of their scanty food supply. They kept only enough for Mabel.

"I don't *sabe* why you didn't kill that man Bent Lance when you had him," said Loyal grimly. The Tarantula stared at him and drew his bandage closer.

"I know you don't *sabe*," he said. "You don't know Injuns. I do. After what's took place can Bent Lance go back to his village and be kept as chief? He's been dragged off, dressed like a squaw, tied an' beaten by a white man. Can he ever hold up his head among his tribe when it's known?"

"Of course not. But no one knows it."

"His only son knows it. His only son has seen his father's shame. If Bent Lance is a strong man that son will never reach the village alive. Bent Lance will kill him on the trail. If he does that . . . Well! Even an Injun can't live with the knowledge that he has killed his own son. If Bent Lance is a weak man—and now I think he is—then he will let his son get back in safety and in a year the story will be over all the villages. No. I'm right. Bent Lance is more completely ruined than if he had been merely killed. Sin-ka-atin is my next man. I'm hittin' his trail as soon as I kin. Good-by to you all."

When Loyal stopped his pony at the first turn in the trail and glanced back he saw the Tarantula sitting cross-legged in the gray buffalo grass on the hill-crest stabbing with his knife into the red earth. His body was silhouetted against the rising sun and Loyal turned back to the trail. Revenge, he thought, is a kind of wild justice.

The Kentuckians closed in with a deep shout, dropping a dozen Shawnees at the first volley, and then leaping forward with long knives ready. . . .

WARPATH OF THE BUCKSKIN BIG KNIVES

A Novelet of Rebellion in the Drowned Lands

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

The future of the young American republic was at stake when John Fraser and the ragged little Army of the West plunged into those trackless, flooded wastes to halt the Hair-buyer General's Redcoat horde.

AT least, John Fraser had not been scalped! His hair still grew on his head where nature had planted it, instead of ornamenting the war-belt of some painted Shawnee brave. He had that to be thankful for whenever the restrictions of his captivity began to make him desperate. His ankle chain rattled on the puncheon floor as he moved about the big room where he was at work.

It was not a hard captivity, Fraser had to admit. As he wielded a twig broom sweeping out the big hall prior to Colonel Rochblave's dance that night, he realized that his life was far easier than it would have been if the British had not taken him over from the war party that had made him prisoner. He was a sort of servant, who labored all day without either chance of pay or hope of release, but at least he went about the quiet streets of Kaskaskia pretty much as though he were a free man. Except for the iron chain that joined the cuffs riveted about his two ankles, he was never under guard. What was there to guard against? The nearest American armed forces were hundreds of miles to the eastward of this Mississippi Valley country, in that summer of 1778.

Finishing his work, Fraser wiped his forehead on his woolen sleeve and looked about him. The hall was almost ready for the *fête* of *m'sieu le commandant*. The British had technically ruled this eastern bank of the Mississippi for nearly a generation now, but the people of the Great Valley were still French in sentiment and tongue, as well as in blood. Colonel Rochblave had been a French officer before he accepted a British commission as commander of the district. Drowsy settlements beside far western rivers! It was hard for these isolated people to take very seriously the fact that the seaboard colonies were now at war with Britain.

As a long shadow fell across the door, Fraser looked up sharply. Then he grinned.

"Pierre!" he said. The newcomer slapped him on the back, a playful swing of a mighty hand that would have felled anyone less solidly built than John Fraser.

"*Eh bien, mon ami,* what is new since last I saw you?"

Pierre Goncourt was a *coureur de bois,* one of those hardy French trappers whose forebears had first come to the Mississippi Valley with La Salle. He was nearly a head taller than John Fraser's own solid six feet, and he had the shoulders of an ox. When Pierre laughed, the sound could be heard half across the settlement, though when he ranged the forest he drifted through the shadows as silently as any of Cornstalk's warriors.

"There is nothing new here in town," Fraser said with a shrug. "Nothing ever happens here. Did you pick up any news of the war along the trails?"

"All that you of the Big Knives can think about is the war," Pierre complained, sitting up on the edge of a table so that his feet, in their red-quilled moccasins, swung just clear of the floor. The *cour' de bois* was a bearded giant in his fringed buckskins, only differing in appearance from an American forest-runner by the greater degree of ornamentation on his leather clothing. "What news I have is bad for your side, *mon ami.* Things do not go well with the *Bostonnais.* The King's Redcoats drive your ragged armies from pillar to post."

John Fraser sighed. He was far from the seaboard where Washington's ragged

Continentals were actually fighting, but he knew that the war was equally important to all parts of the Colonies. Also, like Dan Boone and Harrod and other Kentuckians, he knew that victory or defeat along the thinly defended western frontier was far more important to the American cause as a whole than the gentlemen of the Continental Congress sometimes realized. Lieutenant Governor Hamilton was at Detroit with a strong force of British regulars—aided by a swarm of dark-skinned Indian warriors—and there were rumors that he would soon march on Fort Pitt. If that far western outpost of the colonies should ever fall, it would mean that the whole back-door of the young nation would swing wide open to a swift blow that might end the rebellion once and for all.

"Do not worry, *mon ami,*" Pierre Goncourt swung down off the table, and gave Fraser another of his tremendous slaps on the back before turning to the door with his long rifle slanting over his shoulder and his coonskin cap rakishly askew. "There is no use in your worrying. All these things will be settled in the end as *le bon Dieu* decides, and there is nothing that either you or I can do about them."

Do not worry! John Fraser's gaunt, dark-browed face grew grim as he stood there, gripping the broom handle till his knuckles grew taut and white from the strain. Do not worry! That was easy for someone else to say, easy for someone like Pierre, who had been born and raised in the French settlements along the Mississippi and had never been east of the Scioto in his life. It was different with John Fraser.

The few words of trail-side gossip that Pierre had brought back, news months-old that had been passed from mouth to mouth along the frontier, brought a grimly clear picture to Fraser. The harried, ill-fed, ill-equipped Continental armies were again in retreat. Long lines of gaunt men in dusty blue and buff, hard-eyed men who had little beside their own stubborn courage to sustain them, they were again falling back before the more numerous and infinitely better equipped legions of George the Third. Fraser thought of that small cache that he had been able to steal during the past months and now had buried at the base of a tall elm on the eastern edge of town. As soon as he had enough stores to give him a fighting chance, he was going to break the weak link in his chain and plunge into the forests to the eastward. Each night before he slept, he rubbed one of the links against a stone for an hour, and he now thought that he could snap it at will.

WITH the coming of a summer dusk, lights began to twinkle in the many windows of Kaskaskia. The town had nearly a thousand inhabitants, that strong-point of the Great Valley at the junction of the Kaskaskia and Mississippi Rivers, and its neatly painted houses gave it an appearance far different from that of the log settlements along the Allegheny slopes. The French had founded Kaskaskia nearly seventy years before; the town had already passed through two generations; and the greater part of its inhabitants had been born and reared there. It was a settled, dignified town with a history. On the bank of the river stood the fort, the watch-dog of the settlement, with its walls of heavy logs and the brazen muzzles of its cannon gleaming faintly in the lamplight.

Marie Despard was one of the pleasanter things in Fraser's life in Kaskaskia. Marie had black hair that hung long to her shoulders, instead of being cut short in the manner of most frontier women, and she had the kind of piquant face that a man remembers. Just at sunset Fraser stood talking to her, at the side of Kaskaskia's broad main street.

"But, Jean!" the girl was saying, "It is not so ver' necessary for you to remain the captive, and always wear that chain upon your ankles. If you would only take the oath of loyalty to *le Roi* in London they would probably set you free."

"I wouldn't take freedom at that price," Fraser said grimly. The girl lifted both hands in humorous exasperation.

"*Mon dieu,* but you Beeg Knives of Kaintuck are a stubborn lot! But—at that—perhaps I admire you for it. We French have our swift enthusiasms, but we need one of your stubborn breed to drive us on! *Au revoir,* Jean. Perhaps I will see you tomorrow."

There was a smile on John Fraser's

big-boned and stubborn face as he stood watching Marie walk away. There was the sort of woman who could help a man take a piece of frontier land and develop it into a real home! Not until the girl's graceful figure had vanished around the corner of a lane did Fraser turn—and bumped squarely into three men in red uniforms who had come out of a doorway just ahead! One of them instantly knocked him sprawling in the mud.

Fraser wiped the muck from his face and sat up, to stare into the grinning faces of three red-coated Tory militiamen. Two were private soldiers, the third was Leftenant Clancy of the military garrison. Very foppish and elegantly dressed was Leftenant Clancy, with neatly powdered hair and a waxed black mustache.

"Next time keep out of my way, you rebel fool!" he said.

"Damn you!" Fraser snarled, his Scottish temper getting out of control for once. Clancy rocked back on his heels, and began to switch his polished boots with the riding crop he carried.

"So it's not enough that I find you daring to talk to one of the girls of this town, but now it's trouble you seek, my fine rebel!" he said softly. "Then we'll be glad to accommodate you. I have never held with the Commandant in this matter of pampering prisoners anyway, and now we have insolence to His Majesty's officers! On your knees, rebel dog, and beg my pardon. *Get down on your knees!*"

Slowly John Fraser rose to his feet. There was the devil in Clancy's eyes, and in the ever swifter tapping of his whip against his boot. Fraser knew what was going to happen to him, but his own temper was up. All the stubborn pride of his Scottish ancestors was in John Fraser, and all the sturdy independence of the Kentucky frontiersman that he was. He folded his arms, while his square jaw jutted forward like the prow of a ship.

"You can go to the devil!" he said.

Clancy's eyes narrowed to pin-points of venom. He barked an order, and the two soldiers moved to obey. They had lost their grins now, no longer enjoying the game, but the habit of disciplined obedience was strong. A moment later Fraser had been stripped to the waist and bound facing a tree, with his hands tied high above his head.

"I'll have no rebel prisoner defying *me!*" Clancy said, and his riding whip whistled through the air.

THE whip cracked across Fraser's back with a noise like a pistol shot, and the Kentuckian set his teeth in his lower lip. He did not utter a sound. Then, before the whip could fall again, another voice cut in.

"It seems to me that you exceed your authority, *m'sieu,*" the newcomer said. It was Pierre Goncourt, the whole six feet five of him in his fringed buckskins, standing with his moccasined feet wide apart and his horny thumbs hooked in his girdle. One hand, perhaps by coincidence, was closed around his war-hatchet in its beaded sheath. Clancy turned to face him with an oath.

"Mind your own affairs, *m'sieu!*" the officer snapped. Pierre did not move.

"Anything that happens when I am around is my affair, *mon ami,*" he said. "I am that kind of a man. I saw the whole affair and heard the whole thing from yonder window, and I say that this man was in no way at fault. Do we go together to lay the whole matter before *le commandant,* or do you just go off and forget all about it?"

For a long moment Clancy hesitated, biting his lips. He knew well enough what decision the easy-going Rochblave would make if the matter was officially reported. At last, with another oath, he turned on his heel and stalked off with his two soldiers behind him. The *coureur de bois* cut Fraser loose from the tree and handed him his shirt.

"Thanks, Pierre!" Fraser said. The giant forest-runner grinned through his beard.

"It was nothing, *mon ami!* There are times when these red-coated soldiers give me the great pain. But—look out for that Clancy! The devil is in him, and he will keep this affair until there comes a time when he can get even with you, when there is no one around to help."

Many candles shed a golden light through the Great Hall at Kaskaskia, where Colonel Rochblave was giving his dance. Pine boughs decorated the painted

walls, and a small orchestra played in a corner. The officers of the garrison of Colonial militia were there in uniform. The other citizens of the town were in their best silk and broadcloth, while most of the women wore Parisian finery that had come up from New Orleans in the spring convoy and was only a year behind the times. The whole affair was very festive and gay and light-hearted.

John Fraser, wearing a clean linen shirt loaned him for the occasion, was posted behind a long table at one side of the hall, helping several of Rochblave's servants with the refreshments. It was typical of this essentially French civilization of the Mississippi Valley that the refreshments were very light and epicurean compared to the solid fare that would have been found at a similar gathering in Kentucky or Virginia. Pastries, candied fruits, dressed wild-fowl—all the Gallic cooking ingenuity had been called into play. Fraser noticed that, as usual, most of the conversation was in French. The British flag flew over Kaskaskia, but only a few of the people had English as their mother tongue.

LEFTENANT CLANCY was present in the colorful throng. The Irish adventurer moved from group to group, exchanging snuff with the men and bowing from the waist to the women, but more than once Fraser caught the officer's brooding glance upon him. There was something chilling about Clancy's cold stare, and Fraser made a sudden decision. Sometime before dawn he would snap the weak link in his chain, dig up his scanty store of supplies, and strike out into the three hundred miles of wilderness that separated him from the Kentucky settlements. He would be unarmed as well as poorly supplied, and the odds would be against his ever getting through, but it was better than staying here. Fraser knew that the next time Clancy struck him, his own hot Kentuckian temper would lead him into an earnest attempt to kill the man, and that would probably result in his own death before a firing squad or under the lash.

At that, there was something very suitable about his picking this particular night for an attempt to escape. The date was July the Fourth, 1778. Just two years to a day since Mr. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence had been read out in Philadelphia! Two years of disappointment and defeat, of sinking Continental fortunes, of things going from bad to worse. But if Fraser could get through to the Kentucky settlements with news of Hamilton's planned attack on Fort Pitt, he might contribute something to the safety of that vulnerable and ill-defended western frontier of the colonies.

The dance went on, the various couples drifted to the refreshment table and back again. Once Fraser was sent to the storehouse for another keg of wine. Coming back with the wooden cask on his shoulder, he paused for a moment to draw a breath of fresh air in the warm darkness that was still comparatively cool after the closeness of the Great Hall. The Kaskaskia River was before him, silvered by the pale light of a waning moon, and he thought he saw some dim figures slipping from shadow to shadow along the river bank. But he could not be sure, and it did not really matter. If he had seen anyone at all, it would be a few of La Monthe's Indians sneaking into town in the hopes of getting a noggin of rum during the festivities. Fraser went back to his post.

The *fête* continued. The sweating orchestra filled the hall with music, many feet scraped on the floor. Glancing at the open windows, Fraser saw that many soldiers had come down from the fort to watch the festivities. Some of them even wore their white cross-belts and carried their muskets—probably sentries who had stolen away from the boredom of their quiet posts to watch the dancing. What did it matter, with the nearest possible enemy three hundred miles away? Then Fraser glanced at the door—and almost dropped the tray of glasses he was holding. Standing in the open doorway was a gaunt, red-bearded giant in ragged buckskins and a weather-beaten broad-brimmed black hat. No French or Canadian *cour' de bois* was this, but an unmistable Yankee frontiersman, who leaned grimly on the muzzle of his long rifle. Then Fraser recognized him.

It was George Rogers Clark—Clark of the Rivers—Lieutenant-Colonel in the

Virginia militia and military commander of Kentucky!

FRASER stared, and rubbed his eyes, and stared again. For Clark to appear there, at Kaskaskia near the Mississippi, was almost as improbable as for His Brittanic Majesty himself to come riding down the Trace with the Royal Horse Guards behind him! The dancers still moved about the floor, all unheeding of that gaunt figure in the doorway, but at last an Indian who had been squatting in a corner saw him, and gave tongue in a shrill whoop!

The dancing ceased. The music of the orchestra abruptly died away. One little French fiddler continued for a few strains after his fellows, until he also saw the apparition at which they were all staring. His bow fell to the floor with a clatter. Then Clark spoke, his deep voice booming out in the sudden silence, his haggard face grim and unchanging.

"Go right on with your dancing, good people," he said. "Do not let me disturb you. I just ask you to bear in mind that you are now dancing in part of the territory of the State of Virginia and are no longer under the flag of Great Britain. The fort and the town are both completely in our hands."

Clark's deep voice died away, and the strained silence continued. The unbelievable had happened! The Big Knives had appeared out of the wilderness to capture Kaskaskia, and the war had come to the Great Valley!

Then the silence was broken by a sudden babel of sound as everyone spoke at once. Some of the officers drew their swords, but the soldiers who had been outside the windows had disappeared, and their places had been taken by gimlet-eyed frontiersmen in travel-stained buckskins. The surprise was complete. The furtive figures that Fraser had seen along the river bank, a hundred and seventy-five men of Virginia and Kentucky, had taken the careless town and the fort without the loss of a man. Not until a few moments later, when Fraser looked around for Patrick Clancy, did he realize that the Irish officer had slipped away through a back door during the sudden confusion.

Within an hour the garrison and militia had all been disarmed, and the inhabitants of Kaskaskia were peering nervously out through their shutters at the patrols of the Big Knives who moved through the streets with no sound but the soft pad of their deerskin moccasins. They had come three hundred miles through the wilderness so swiftly that no Indian scout had been able to send word of their coming before them, those tattered frontiersmen with the hard eyes and bearded faces, and for the past two days they had marched without any food at all.

The night wind was warm in John Fraser's face. Now freed of his chains, and armed with a musket taken from one of the garrison, he prowled through the town in search of the fugitive Clancy. Street after street he covered without seeing any sign of the missing officer, and he came to the river bank just in time to see the dim shape of a canoe vanishing swiftly downstream in the darkness. Fraser flung the musket to his shoulder and fired, but the range was too long for the smoothbore weapon. He was too late! His revenge would have to wait upon the uncertain hazards of frontier warfare. Standing there in the moonlight, Fraser shook his fist in helpless anger. Then he turned back.

Fraser found Colonel Clark inside the big town hall where the dance had been held. The local merrymakers had been sent to their homes, and the place was now occupied by a score of hungry riflemen who were wolfing down the last of the refreshments. George Rogers Clark was a red-headed giant with deep set eyes, and the soft drawl of the aristocratic, tidewater Virginia whence he had come before the lure of the frontier had called him west of the Cumberlands. At the moment his broad-brimmed hat was pushed well to the back of his shaggy head, and a wide smile of relief had eased some of the deep lines of privation in his face.

"Y'all did right well, boys," he was saying to the gaunt riflemen around him, "I knew yo' would. After all, it was a case of take the town or go hungry for the third day, and I knew that no Kentuckian would lose a battle under such circumstances!"

"My belt-buckle was scraping my backbone as it was!" a lanky rifleman said, his mouth full of Colonel Rochblave's pastries, and a gust of deep-toned laughter answered him.

As Fraser walked toward the rebel leader, Clark turned and held out his hand. With the keen memory for faces and names possessed by most men who lived in the sparsely settled districts, Clark called him by name.

"John Fraser, by Heaven! I recall you, suh, when we were together at the defense of Harrodsburg a year ago. What brought you here?"

"A Shawnee war-party took me prisoner near Logan's," Fraser said. "I've been a prisoner here for eight months."

"That long? Then you must know conditions. What are the present garrisons of Cahokia and Vincennes?" Clark snapped. When Fraser told him that both posts were defended only by militia, with Hamilton's British forces far away at Detroit, the Kentucky commander nodded in satisfaction. "I'll start parties out to capture both posts as soon as my men have had a little food and rest. When the settlers hear the news that France is now allied on our side against the Redcoats, it should end any worry about their technical loyalty to King George. Then we'll wait for reinforcements from the coast before setting out for Detroit."

"Then you really expect reinforcements?" Fraser asked. Clark shrugged.

"Even Congress can scarcely expect me to hold a thousand miles of frontier with a hundred and seventy-five men."

The reinforcements did not come! That was the most important single fact of all, as summer dragged into autumn. Cahokia and Vincennes had both fallen to the Big Knives as easily as Kaskaskia, and the French colonists were easily won over to taking the oath of allegiance to the United States instead of to the British king. All those things went as Colonel Clark had planned them—but no reinforcements came in from the east. Those expresses that hurried eastward with despatches failed to return, and from the governor in Williamsburg there came no word at all.

The American flag flew over the forts at Kaskaskia and Cahokia and Vincennes, hundreds of miles farther west than ever it had flown before. The local Indian tribes were cowed by the sudden arrival of the *Bostonnais,* led by a tall and red-headed devil-brother of the Great Spirit. Things were well in hand locally, but in the meantime there were no reinforcements from home. That fact hung heavily on the minds of all the little garrison. To John Fraser it seemed that this period was the lull before the coming storm.

II

MATTERS became slowly worse as autumn faded into winter. The enlistment time of Clark's little army had expired, and nearly half the men insisted on setting out for home. He had only about a hundred of his original frontiersmen left when snow began to bank along the northern trails and ice fringed the upcountry ponds. A hundred isolated men to defend the far western frontier against the might of the Redcoats! The rumor along the Indian trails was that Colonel Hamilton was soon to march south from Detroit with eight hundred men to smash the presumptuous rebels who had come blundering into his domain.

John Fraser had now for months been an enlisted man in Clark's forces. Except for the chain-galls that still scarred his ankles, he had half forgotten his period of captivity. He was with his own people again. The best rifle that he had been able to get was not as good as his own Deckhardt that he had lost when he was captured, and his new buckskin hunting shirt was cut on the French pattern, but otherwise he had reverted to type.

In general, Fraser was content. He had his moments of discouragement, of course. Sometimes, standing a chilled and shivery tour of guard duty in a driving snow storm, while the thrums of his buckskins froze to icicles and the driving flakes stung his eyes, he wondered if all this was really worth while, but such moods were short-lived. Like all those men who had elected to remain with Clark, Fraser was beginning to share the leader's vision of a day when this wilderness of the Northwest Territory would become a pleasant and smiling land, dotted with peaceful farms. One of those farms would be his, Fraser hoped—and always the smiling

face of Marie Despard brightened and strengthened his dream. And, no matter how bleak and frozen the tour of guard duty on the river bank or forest edge, there was always the relaxation of the return to the warmth of a blazing fire in the Despards' little home or in one of the log huts that served as barracks. In the barracks would be a bowl of steaming rum-punch on the hob, and Pierre Concourt or some of the other *coureurs de bois* would be smoking their pipes and swapping yarns with the Big Knives as they sat on the long benches. The French colonists of Kaskaskia had long since added sincere loyalty to the technical allegiance of their oath to the American government.

John Fraser had just returned to the barracks from such a tour of sentry duty on a snowy day in late December when the bad news came. At the moment he was standing close to the fire in his sopping buckskins, holding a warm mug of rum in his chilled hands, while the ice melted off his thrums to spatter down on the splintery puncheon floor. Clark and Captain Bowman were sitting at a table with Pierre and some of the local militia leaders. Then the door swung open, letting in a momentary blast of chill wind and a flurry of snow flakes, before the newcomer could close the portal and stand panting with his back against it.

The man was a scout just in from the trails, coated with snow, and with even his eyebrows twin frosty ridges on his reddened face. His long rifle was reversed under his arm.

"The Bloody-backs have come, Colonel!" he shouted as he caught sight of Clark. "Vincennes has fallen. Hamilton has retaken the town and the fort. He is on the Wabash with five hundred men!"

There was a brief pause. Clark rose slowly to his towering height and looked about him. Pierre and Bowman also stood up, and were facing Clark with their thumbs hooked in their girdles. Then Clark began to smile, his ruddy hair metallic in the firelight and his deep-set eyes recklessly a-smoulder.

"So Hamilton is on the Wabash!" he rumbled. "I repeat what I have often said before—these western streams of the Mississippi and the Ohio country are rivers of destiny. The entire westward expansion of our country depends upon what happens along their banks in these present troubled years. By taking Vincennes now, Hamilton is ready to sweep down upon us at the first break of spring. He knows that it would be utter madness for *us* to make any attempt to attack him by surprise this winter. He knows that Vincennes is two hundred miles away from us, across trails that will be spongy and sodden at this time of year. It would be contrary to all the laws of military science for us to try it."

CLARK'S voice was very low and casual now. He was naming all the solid, conventional reasons why they did not dare plunge into the wilderness to attack Vincennes, why they must simply wait and hope to beat off Hamilton's attack in the spring, but his eyes were smouldering. Fraser began to grin as he sensed the other man's mood.

"And Hamilton has British regulars in his force, Colonel, as well as the Royal Artillery and all his Indians," he said. Clark nodded again.

"The idea is madness, of course. We are too few. Hamilton has many supplies, while we have almost none. His men have bayonets, while ours have only knives."

"But they are very big knives, *mon ami!*" Pierre grinned.

Clark went on as though he had not heard. "If we go to Vincennes, and Hamilton has word of our coming, his Indian allies can probably trap our shivering column in the Drowned Lands and wipe us out to a man. For us to make such a march in winter would be utter madness."

Clark paused again, and then Pierre laughed. The big *cour' de bois* filled the log walled cabin with his booming laughter.

"Of course, the idea is madness, *m'sieu le commandant!*" he roared. "When do we start? Of course you are going to make the attempt. I can read it in your eyes. And I, for one, am going with you! *En avant, mes Bostonnais!*"

The room was filled with deep-voiced cheering as the two men shook hands, two tall men who came from different bloods

but were alike in sharing the reckless courage of the frontier!

It was early February before the little expedition was ready to set out. Clark's reckless courage was always tempered by careful planning, and he liked to have more than one shot in his pouch. His principal weapon was to be the surprise element of *any* assault by his small force in this winter weather, the sheer unexpectedness of the mad endeavor, but his ace-in-the-hole was a big barge that he had bought and christened the *Willing*.

Clark had made the barge into a floating fortress. It was equipped with stout log bulwarks and with half a dozen small cannon that had been shipped up the Mississippi by sympathizers in New Orleans, and with spare supplies for the main force. Manned by thirty selected men, the "Kentucky Navy" pushed out into the current of the Kaskaskia River and started downstream to the Ohio, some days before the overland expedition was ready to start. The barge was to remain at a certain rendezvous thirty miles below Vincennes until the main force came along, then to pole upstream to draw the fire of Hamilton's cannon and cover the landward assault of the riflemen. Consideration of that plan made John Fraser feel a little more confident of the chances of their own mad venture. It was a long gamble, but it might work.

Not that there was any doubt about Fraser's willingness to go! His canny Scottish blood made him consider the hazards of the expedition, but the stakes were high enough to be worth the risk.

"It's this way," he told Marie Despard one winter afternoon when they sat by the fire in her father's cabin, "all this vast territory north of the River Ohio is at stake in this wilderness campaign. We have few men—but even the British do not have very many. Along this far frontier, ten men play the part of a regiment, and a hundred constitute an army corps!"

"Really, my Jean, you of the *Bostonnais* are amazing people!" she said. "I think I am glad that your army came to Kaskaskia."

"You'd better be!" he grinned, his clear eyes probing hers. "For once we take possession of a place, we never let it go."

"It is in my mind that I know what you mean," replied the girl, never lowering her long dark lashes. "And I will wait here for you."

IT was a cold but sunny winter morning when the ragged Army of the West set out from Kaskaskia. Detailed as an advance scout because of his knowledge of the country, John Fraser leaned on his rifle beside Pierre Goncourt as the two of them stood near the river bank. They heard the thud of drums, and the shrill notes of one lone fife, and then the head of the column came into view.

George Rogers Clark rode first, gigantic in his fringed buckskins and broad-brimmed black hat, astride a big-boned Spanish gelding. Behind him came a pair of drummers manfully pounding on the resounding cow-hide as they marched, and between them was a middle-aged French farmer playing on a fife. After the field music came the main column, with the few officers mounted and the rest of the men on foot.

No one had a uniform in that motley array of mingled Kentucky frontiersmen and French colonists who swung down the trail in a ragged column with their moccasins padding softly on the damp ground. Each man was dressed against the cold according to the dictates of his own taste. There were no supply wagons, no baggage-train. Each man carried a few days' supply of jerked buffalo meat and dried corn in his game-pouch, there were a few laden baggage horses, and that was all. Never had an invading army set out with less equipment. However, their powder horns were full, and their backwoods faces were alight with the fire of men who follow a leader whose courage and judgment has already been proved along other trails. There were about sixty of Clark's original frontiersmen, and an equal number of French volunteers. A hundred and twenty-two men in all!

The Army of the West might be lacking in numbers and in supplies, but at least it had plenty of flags! The women of Kaskaskia and Cahokia had made banners and pennons for their men to carry, so that each miniature company of eight or ten men bore its own insignia. To the cheers of those settlers who were to re-

main behind, they marched out through the log stockade. A few Indian scouts, painted black and white, trotted ahead with rifles at the trail.

Clark momentarily drew rein beside Fraser and Pierre as they waited at the river bank.

"All ready?" he asked. Fraser nodded, but Pierre spat thoughtfully in the mud.

"There's just one thing I must say before we go, *m'sieu le commandant,*" he said, "I have been smelling the wind and watching the river these last few days, and there has been a lot of rain. It is in my mind that we may find the Drowned Lands between here and Vincennes so flooded that they are like a vast lake."

"We'll have to take our chances. The Wabash is unfordable at Vincennes and we must keep to the southern route," Clark shrugged. Pierre grinned through his beard, and tilted his fur cap to a rakish angle, and dropped his long rifle into the curve of his left arm.

"Me, I do not mind," he said, "I was born with web feet anyway."

Marie was standing beside the trail with the other women, a red kerchief tied over her dark hair. She held out both hands to Fraser as he paused beside her.

"Take care of yourself on this journey, my Jean," she said. Her eyes were shadowed, but Fraser grinned.

"I've been doing that all my life!"

"Ever the stubborn Kaintuck!" She smiled for an instant. "But be particularly careful on this journey. I dreamed of that Patrick Clancy last night, dreamed that he menaces the security of your whole expedition. And you must come back!"

"We'll take care of him if he comes along. Good-by!" Fraser said.

THE drums thudded again, and the Army of the West moved down the narrow trail. Two hundred miles of flooded winter wilderness lay ahead of them, and many times their number of British regulars and Tory militia and Indian allies, most of them behind the stout walls of a log fort on the banks of an unfordable river. Yet the men of that irregular column were singing as they vanished between the trees. The watching villagers saw the last of the rear guard disappear behind the dense wall of forest that surrounded the clearing. For a little while longer they could hear the singing, and the notes of the drums, but then both faded out and there was silence. For victory or disaster, under circumstances that allowed no middle ground between those grim extremities, the western defenders of the young American republic had taken up the trail. Father Gibault, the old parish priest who had blessed the French colonial members of the expedition before they started, was shaking his head as he walked back to his white-washed church.

Three nights later the men who followed George Rogers Clark were still singing, though the tenor of their voices had changed. They were hoarse now, and weary, with the exertion of covering nearly thirty miles a day over muddy ground and through the icy fords of swollen rivers. Sometimes they had to wade knee deep in water for miles on end. Also, it was raining again.

Always it rained! There was no chance to dry out clothes that had been soaked in the fording of streams, there were no tents to shelter them. Yet they managed to light some fires on the patch of high ground they had found at dusk—for backwoodsmen could coax a fire out of even sodden branches—and some game had been taken during the day. When there was hot food available, things were not so bad.

Holding his steaming moccasins close to the fire in an effort to take some of the chill from his wet and numbed feet, Fraser heard some rifleman at a nearby fire break into the words of "Yankee Doodle."

"Father and I went down to camp
Along of Captain Goodwin. . . ."

The song that a British surgeon had written to mock the tatterdemalion Continental forces, and that the rebels had adopted for their own, was ringing out in the midst of the sodden Illinois wilderness. Then that song died away, and other voices at a different fire took up the haunting melody of an old French song of the *voyageurs.*

"Au clair de la lune,
Mon ami Pierrot, . . ."

The army was wet and cold and tired, but it was still cheerful. Lieutenant-Colonel George Rogers Clark of the Kentucky militia possessed the priceless gift of being able to keep up the morale of his men. It was a gift that many higher ranking officers would have given two-thirds of their pay to possess.

Fraser sometimes wondered whether Clark ever slept at all. The commander's tall figure moved steadily from fire to fire, stopping to talk to each group. He was likely to be prowling from one sentry post to the next at any hour of the night; his wide shoulders seemed always silhouetted against the sky at dawn. Now he paused briefly by the fire where Fraser and some others were sitting, squatting on his heels to pick up a smouldering twig and light some of his scanty supply of precious Virginia tobacco that he had crammed into his pipe. The endless rain dripped from the brim of his broad hat, but his gaunt face was smiling.

"Things could be worse, boys," he said, "At least it's not freezing. A good freeze would turn our clothing into sheets of ice, and give these flooded thickets a frozen coating that would break under our weight at each step and slow our progress."

Things could be worse! A poor comfort in times of adversity, but it was the only comfort they had. Already the officers had ceased to ride their lean and fodderless animals. They had to show the privates that they had the same endurance as the men they led.

"Things could be worse!" Clark repeated as he walked on to the next fire. Fraser shivered as he looked into the damp blackness outside the small area of fireglow. His guess was that things would be a lot worse before they got any better.

DAWN was chill and cold—and raining. Still it rained! The drops beat down with a steady patter, spattering off the bare branches of the trees and threshing into the reaches of muddy water that covered the Drowned Lands. Now, as they stood at the first fork of the Little Wabash, there was no sight of any dry land ahead of them at all, for as far as the eye could see. Only a vast expanse of muddy water dotted by the trunks of trees and the tops of bushes, and with the turgid channel of the flooded river moving past a few yards away. Pierre Goncourt, who had waded out waist deep with his rifle and powder-horn held high above his head, came slowly back again.

"It is no use, *m'sieu,*" he said to Clark. "The water is two to four feet deep along the bank, and the main channel is impassable."

At the moment they were completely blocked. Discouraged murmurs came from the weary, sodden men huddled along the bank behind Clark.

"Even the weather is agin us!" someone said, and others growled agreement, but Clark's deep voice cut through their lethargy like a whip-lash.

"We're not going to let a little thing like a swollen river stop us! There's more ways of getting across than by wading. Fraser, take some men and cut me down the biggest tree you can find. We'll make a dug-out."

At least, John Fraser reflected a little later as he labored with axe and adze, the work kept him from remembering that he was cold! It was a painful and back-breaking task, but they all kept at it in relays till the salt sweat mingled with the rain that was trickling down their faces. When the dug-out was finally finished, the day was gone and a few smoky fires were smouldering in the gloom. Clark wiped the rain from his eyes.

"John, you will take the dug-out and a few men at daylight and pole across the flood to mark the trail to the next patch of high ground beyond this one," he said. Fraser nodded, but from somewhere back in the crowd came a plaintive voice.

"But suppose there ain't no high ground beyond?" it asked. Big Pierre Goncourt snorted in his beard.

"Then, *mon brave,* you'll drown! That's better than starving to death, and that's what will happen unless we get out of these flooded lands before the last of our food is gone!"

They took the dug-out at dawn, pushing the unwieldly craft ahead with long poles, Fraser in the bow. It was like a nightmare as they glided away from that muddy ridge into the dawn-mist, poling between the tangled trunks of the trees. Every breath of the chill air had a damp and sodden smell. There was a gnawing hun-

ger in the pit of Fraser's stomach as they drifted between the trees of this drowned and eery forest from which the flood had driven the game they had counted upon getting, and the grim spectre of starvation was very near.

And still it rained! For days there had been no change, no let-up in that leaden sky from which the water fell endlessly. It was hard for Fraser to recall how the air had smelled on a dry day, now that he had lived for so long in a world of chill dampness.

The first patch of high ground they found was clear across the second fork of the Little Wabash, a full three miles from where the rest of the men were encamped. There were long faces when Fraser made his report to the main body, but Clark only shrugged.

"We've got to go on," he said, and plunged into the waist-deep water.

Three men who were too ill to march were placed in the dug-out, together with the scanty supply of spare powder. The rest of them set off in single file, guided by the blaze marks that Fraser had left on the trees as he poled back. They stumbled doggedly ahead in water that was never below their knees and often was up to their hips. Icy water it was, in those February days, water that was fed by melting snows in the northern hills.

"I never knew I enlisted to be a bleedin' duck!" a gaunt Kentuckian complained, and a gust of grim laughter ran along the plodding line.

WEARILY they plunged ahead, splashing through the muddy waters, often stumbling and sometimes falling full length. It took them all day to make the three miles across to that next patch of high ground, including the time lost in ferrying all hands across the deep main channels in that one crude dug-out, but at the end they were well across both forks of the Little Wabash and had put the first of their main hurdles behind them.

That night they killed and ate two of the remaining horses. The flour they had brought with them was wet and spoiled, —the rest of the food nearly gone. Yet morale was still high. The gaunt, hollow-eyed frontiersmen boasted that they were beating the worst that nature had been able to send against them, and they would sweep clean across the palisade of Fort Sackville at Vincennes when they came splashing out of the sodden wilderness. If some of the older heads among the officers were beginning to despair of pulling through, they gave no sign to the men who followed them. Captain Bowman put the general feeling when he said:

"We'll be all right, so long as the barge is waiting for us when we reach the main stream."

Clark's deep voice was full of confidence. "She'll be there, all right. We can count on that."

The rest of that frozen march was always a dim and hazy recollection to John Fraser. It was an endless struggle through a flooded wilderness where each day was exactly like the one before, and he lost all count of time. He only knew that they had been weeks on the way, and that there was no end in sight. Sometimes darkness found them camped on a small patch of sodden ground that reared itself a few feet above the surface of the water, sometimes they had to go plodding on through the water in the darkness with only the harsh rasping of their voices and the clutch of unseen hands to keep them together. More than once an exhausted man simply slipped under the water and vanished in those night hours.

They were nearing the end of their journey, but they were even closer to the end of their strength. At last there came a disheartening day when the swollen Embarrass River turned them back completely, and at the end of fourteen hours of heart-breaking labor they found themselves three miles further away from Vincennes than they had been at dawn. They were near enough to hear the morning and evening guns at the fort now, but there was scant comfort in that fact.

The last of the horses had been killed and eaten, nearly the last of the corn was gone. They camped on a muddy island near the main current of the Big Wabash that night, while four men were sent off on a raft of logs to find dry land across the river, and the lone dug-out was sent poling upstream to make contact with the barge and its spare supplies. It was just after dawn that the raft and the dug-out returned together.

The men on the raft had spent the night on their frail platform of logs because they could not locate any high land ahead at all, and the dug-out reported that the barge had failed to come up river. They were left to their own devices. Their ace-in-the-hole, the strong cache of supplies on the barge that was to give them new vigor for the final assault, had failed them.

They were all very near despair that night, huddled together on the muddy ground in the rain, with nothing to eat and no prospect of anything more on the morrow. If La Monthe and his Indians had come out from Vincennes in a flotilla of canoes to attack them then, the rebel Army of the West would probably have ceased to exist in the space of an hour. Clark put some sentries out, leaving them perched in the branches of trees surrounding the camp so that they would at least be above the chill flood that moved sluggishly past on all sides, but it was all that he and the senior officers could do to keep up the spirits of their drenched and disheartened men. One of the French militia died that night, and they buried him in a shallow grave that they dug in the mud with the blades of their hunting knives. It was the twentieth of February, in the year 1779, and the rebel fortunes in the vast Northwest Territory hung by a very thin thread.

III

JOHN FRASER was on guard with the late shift, and it was just at dawn when he heard voices. He was perched in the branches of a tree a little way out in the flood, and as he peered downward he saw two men in a birch-bark canoe. They were paddling slowly between the trees, wielding their paddles with the silent skill of experienced woodsmen, and were peering about them as they came. An instant later he recognized the paddler in the bow of the canoe. It was Patrick Clancy! The Irish adventurer now wore fringed buckskin instead of a red uniform, but there was no mistaking the man.

Fraser lifted his rifle to his shoulder, but then he shook his head and lowered the weapon. It came hard to hold his hand when he had his enemy lined up in his sights, but it had to be done. He could only kill one of the two men, and the other might get away to warn the British in Vincennes. The most important thing was that no one get ahead of them to carry the word that a rebel force was advancing across the Drowned Lands.

Then the two men swung inland. They pulled their canoe up on the muddy bank, and moved off through the underbrush with their rifles at the trail. Fraser dropped down from his perch into the chill water, and splashed across to the canoe. At least he could cut off their retreat!

Reaching the canoe, Fraser pulled it free from the bank. Waist-deep in water, pulling the light craft behind him with one hand while he held his cocked rifle above the flood with the other, he moved parallel to the shore of their muddy islet. It was slow and painful work in the darkness, stumbling over roots and stones as he swirled through the chill flood, veering to one side or the other as tree-trunks loomed up out of the blackness ahead. He was nearly half way around the islet when a sudden burst of rifle fire sounded behind him.

Fraser hastily splashed inland, beaching the canoe and then sprinting across the islet. The reek of powder-smoke hung sharp and heavy on the damp air. He came to the far shore—to find a dozen men peering vainly through the dimness.

"The two of them got away and swam to safety," someone growled. "They'll carry the word of our coming to Hamilton at Vincennes."

"But at least I got their canoe, and they can't travel any faster than we can," Fraser said. Clark's deep voice cut through the pale light.

"That extra canoe will help us in carrying our invalids. For the rest—it will be a race for Vincennes between them and ourselves."

Still forward! Pushing endlessly on! At one point, when the water in the flooded thickets rose to their necks and threatened to block them again, their groping feet found a raised road where the water was only waist deep and that took them splashing all the way through to a grove of sugar maples on a ridge. They were numb from the waist down and soaked from head to foot, their arms ached from holding their rifles over their heads for

hours on end, but they had put many more miles behind them.

That night it turned cold. Clambering down from his perch in a tree after a tour of sentry duty, Fraser found that his frozen thrums tinkled like glass. The cold bit through to the bone. But at last the rain had stopped!

"Mon dieu!" Big Pierre muttered grimly, clearing the sodden powder from the pan of his rifle and refilling it with dry grains. "Look up! You can actually see the stars overhead. I had begun to wonder if they were still there!"

THE change in weather was a mixed blessing. The colder air sharpened their appetites for the food that was not there and they had to break through a half-inch film of ice as they walked knee-deep in water at the start of the morning's march, but at least they had a pale sunshine overhead. Their frozen buckskin garments crackled as they moved. They traveled far that day, even though half-crazed with hunger and staggering as they lurched through the icy water, and in late afternoon they came to a patch of higher ground that was really dry. *Dry!* There was a grim smile on Clark's gaunt and sunken face as he stood looking around.

"When Columbus first saw land he never felt as relieved as I do at the moment!" he said. Another stroke of good fortune came a moment later when a canoe paddled by a pair of Indian women blundered unsuspecting into the camp. In the canoe there was some corn, and a half quarter of buffalo!

As in the case of the deer shot two days before, the last thing that these gaunt men had eaten, there was only enough food to give a bare taste to each of the six score men, but it was something. Watching his tattered companions in that moment, John Fraser realized how much of real discipline comes from the character of the men themselves, rather than from the forms of military drill. These gaunt, ragged, ravenous, and half-frozen men of the Army of the West looked like renegades. They had the grime of muddy flood-waters on their torn buckskins and the beards of eighteen days' growth on their stubborn chins. The chapped and weathered skin of their lean faces was stretched tight over their cheek-bones, and their eyes were like holes burned in a piece of dirty canvas. They were starving—but with a rigid and self-imposed discipline they divided the scanty food with meticulous fairness. Many of the stronger surreptitiously added their own share to the portions of those men who were ill or otherwise in poor shape. They were crude by the social standards of London and Paris, those gaunt frontiersmen, but they had their own dignity, their code of the border.

Clark's deep voice came out of the twilight, and it still managed to hold its old exultant confidence.

"Only one more day's march, you ragged hellions, and then we'll be in sight of Vincennes!"

"One more day's swim, yo' mean," a gaunt Virginian corrected, and the two Indian women stared in surprise as the deep-toned laughter of the Big Knives boomed forth from this group of walking skeletons.

Fort Sackville at Vincennes was a square enclosure of palisaded logs, with the flag of King George floating lazily in the pale winter sun. There were square blockhouses at the corners, with cannon set in embrasures in the upper level. Beyond the fort was the town. Colonel Hamilton had no patrols out at all, in that wet February weather, with Vincennes surrounded by a lake of drowned country. What would be the point of patrols anyway, he reasoned, with no organized foe in the whole western country except for a few score Big Knives two hundred miles away in Kaskaskia?

The British officers in the fort were not even greatly interested when they saw an unusual amount of going and coming on the part of the citizens of the town below the fort, that afternoon. After all, it did not take much to bring the bored settlers out of their houses for argument and discussion in those long winter days when all farming was at a stand-still. Hamilton did not know that Clark had captured an unwary French duck-hunter, converted him to the American cause with the aid of Pierre Goncourt and the others, and then sent him back into town as their emissary. The duck-hunter carried the word that the Big Knives were at hand

in force, that half of their array consisted of Frenchmen from Kaskaskia, and that the citizens of Vincennes had better keep prudently indoors and let the Redcoats in the fort shift for themselves. Hamilton, all unknowing, had lost everything but the fort itself before the first shot was fired.

IT was a thin line of skirmishers that finally broke out from the wooded ridge at dusk, and went splashing through the last two miles of flooded meadow toward Vincennes. The powder in their horns was not very plentiful now, but at least they had succeeded in keeping the last of it dry during the long march, and their rifles were newly primed and ready.

"Forward, *mes amis!*" whispered Pierre Goncourt, a giant figure in the cold starlight. "It seems that we must take the fort before we eat—and I have a great hunger."

John Fraser splashed ahead with the rest through the knee-deep water, his rifle slanting over his shoulder. The gnawing ache of hunger was stronger than ever, with nothing to eat but a thin sliver of venison four days ago and a swallow of buffalo broth two days later, but at the moment he almost forgot about it. They were closing in at last, closing in on the "Hair-buyer General" whose men had long been the terror of the far western frontier, and the prospect of action fired his blood.

As they came close they split by companies in accordance with Clark's whispered orders, swinging around to menace the fort on all sides. Thus far they had come without discovery, all the way to the dry land surrounding Vincennes, but beyond this point they would have to depend on force of arms. Hamilton had no outlying patrols, in that bleak February weather, but he was too good a soldier to neglect the basic security of his fort, as Rochblave had at Kaskaskia the summer before. The heavy log gates at Fort Sackville were tightly closed, and the winter starlight gleamed on the musket barrel of a sentry above the serrated edge of the stockade.

Fraser lay prone behind a hummock near the southwest bastion of the fort, waiting for Clark's signal to begin the action. On one side of him was Simon Kenton, the stocky woodsman who was a veteran of the siege of Boonesboro, and on his other side was Pierre Goncourt. Frontiersman, forest-runner, and French *cour' de bois,* they lay side by side on the frozen ground with their rifles trained on the Redcoat stronghold. Pierre was humming under his breath. They were more than half starved, and they were chilled through, but at least they were on firm ground and they were dry above the knees!

The fact that they had come this far without challenge was proof of the fact that they had beaten Clancy in the race. For a moment Fraser wondered where the Irish adventurer might be now, whether he had drowned in the flooded thickets or was still plodding hollow-eyed on their trail, but then his mind came back to the immediate problem of capturing the Vincennes fort—and getting something to eat.

The quiet of the starlit night was suddenly split by the sharp report of a rifle, somewhere off on the flank.

"That's Clark's signal!" Fraser whispered to the others. Another shot followed that first one, and then another, but there was still no reply from the fort. Secure in their fancied isolation, the garrison thought that the firing was only some Indian allies wasting the King's ammunition for sheer pleasure in the noise, as they so often did. At that moment a soldier with a lanthorn opened a nearby gun-port—and a second later fell back with Simon Kenton's bullet squarely between the eyes.

"Got 'im!" the grim Kentuckian muttered, jerking the knife from his belt to cut another notch in the stock of his long rifle.

Now the Redcoats knew that they were under attack! A bugle blared out within the fort, and drums began to beat the alarm. A moment later one of the cannon in the blockhouses went off with a thunderous crash, and rifle fire quickened to a steady drum-roll. John Fraser had a sudden inspiration.

"Come on!" he shouted. "The cannon are placed too high in the towers to be able to aim close to the fort. Get close to the walls and they can't reach us."

The night was now a flame-shot babel

of noise. The brazen muzzles of the fort's cannon belched their flaming thunder, the whip-lash of the rifles was steady and continuous. Fraser fired, turned on his side to reload, and poured his powder down the muzzle by guess instead of by measure. He felt for a linen patch, laid the bullet on top, and rammed it home. Then he trained his piece on the dark blur of the nearest gun-port and waited.

A few minutes later the nine-pounder fired once more. As a Royal Artilleryman touched his slow-match to the vent hole, there was a sudden flare from the loose powder. In that half second, when the fiery glow illuminated the face of the red-coated gunner, Fraser squeezed the trigger. The stock leaped against his shoulder in the recoil, and the gunner fell backwards from his post, while the gaunt besiegers yelled shrill triumph.

The artillery fire was lessening now, for Hamilton had discovered that he could not depress his pieces enough to reach the close-drawn cordon of riflemen. Also, a dim glow from within the fort silhouetted the gunners each time they swarmed about their pieces to reload, and the keen-eyed squirrel hunters were dropping man after man. Hamilton had cut his gun embrasures too wide!

Though the fire of the heavy guns had grown less, that of the rifles and muskets had greatly increased on both sides. A group of young Frenchmen from Vincennes slipped out to join their cousins from Kaskaskia who were fighting on the side of the *Bostonnais,* bringing with them a welcome supply of powder and balls. At the same time, the garrison were now thickly clustered along the loopholes of the stockade. Each time a besieger fired, a half dozen shots came in reply. They were firing at the flashes of the riflemen.

One of Clark's men cried out as a musket ball took him in the neck a second after he had fired. A French volunteer went the same way. Then Pierre Goncourt touched Fraser on the shoulder.

"Look, *mon brave,* we can beat their game," he said. "Their fort and its loopholes are fixed targets for us, but the defenders cannot see us in the darkness and must aim at the flashes of our guns. As soon as you fire, roll some yards away before you reload."

The word passed swiftly from mouth to mouth along the line, and soon the fire of the defenders ceased to have much effect upon the elusive riflemen outside.

All that night the siege went on, and into the next morning. Fort Sackville was ringed with smoke, a dun mist that lay close to the ground, while the rifle flashes spat through it with venomous tongues of flame. The superior numbers of the garrison availed them not at all, in spite of the fact that they were behind log walls, for the gimlet-eyed frontiersmen picked off man after man at the defending loopholes and the smooth-bore rifles were no match for the long rifles. Skill, accurate shooting, and clever use of cover were winning out over mere numbers. Then, along the northern rim of the besieging lines, there came a sudden diversion. A horde of Indians in full war paint burst out of the thickets with shrill yells, led by two white men in buckskin.

NEVER were Indians so unpleasantly surprised! They were raiding Shawnee bucks from the northern tribes, out on a scalp hunt, accustomed to attacking isolated settlements and without any previous experience with the Big Knives in substantial numbers. As they darted forward, with *castetes* swinging and warhatchets flashing in the sun, one whole sector of the rebel force turned to meet them. They happened to have attacked the lines at the point held by Captain Williams' company, a group composed almost entirely of Kentucky riflemen.

This was just the sort of thing for which these gaunt frontiersmen had been waiting. An actual chance to come to grips with an enemy, after the weeks of the frozen march and then the impersonal sniping of the siege! The Kentuckians closed in with a deep shout, like the bay of a hunting wolf pack, dropping a dozen dusky warriors at the first volley and then leaping forward with long knives ready and rifle butts swinging like flails.

John Fraser went with the yelling throng, charging at full speed across the narrow strip of frozen ground. The memory of thousands of looted farms and massacred settlers was sharp within them. Fraser fired his rifle from the hip at a brave a few feet away, saw the Shawnee

go down in the midst of the whirling smoke, and then reversed his weapon to drive the steel-shod butt in the painted face of the redskin behind. A war-hatchet flashed toward him, cutting a shallow gash in the side of his neck, and he tried to grapple with the oiled and painted body of another dusky warrior, but Pierre Goncourt's long knife flashed past him to catch his assailant in the throat. The vengeance of the enraged frontiersmen crumpled the Indian attack into red ruin and sent the last survivors fleeing for their lives into the thickets.

Half of Williams' company swung back to fill the gap they had momentarily left in the besieging line, the others plunged after the fleeing Shawnees. John Fraser reloaded as he ran, pouring the black powder grains directly down the muzzle and then dropping in a spittle-wet ball from his mouth without bothering with a patch. The man he was chasing, one of the two white men who had led the Indians, had also been reloading. Now he suddenly wheeled to let fly at his pursuer with a quick snap-shot.

FRASER flung up his rifle and fired at the same moment, the two reports blending into one. A bullet plucked at the brim of Fraser's hat—but his own shot had gone true! The other man dropped his rifle and slowly fell forward. Not until that moment, not till the buckskin-clad figure of the Tory had crumpled to the ground, did Fraser realize just who it was that he had been chasing. The man he had just killed was Patrick Clancy, late Leftenant in His Brittanic Majesty's loyalist militia! Failing to reach the fort before Clark's flying column, Clancy had encountered an Indian raiding party and had led it to the attack in the hope of breaking the siege.

Slowly John Fraser shouldered his rifle and turned back. His personal vengeance was completed. He heard a sudden burst of cheering come from the tattered lines that surrounded the fort, and as he came again to the forest edge he saw a white flag being carried out from the log gate of the stockade. The Bloody-backs had had more than their fill of frontier sharpshooting and were ready to surrender the fort!

Fraser was grinning as he shook hands with Pierre Goncourt, whose white teeth gleamed through his beard as he went around slapping everyone on the back. It was a great moment for all of them, even though none of them realized just how much they had done for the rebellion. George Rogers Clark's ragged army, that had numbered only one hundred and seventy-five men when he first started down the Ohio nearly a year before, had won control of the Rivers of Destiny and decided the future of more territory than had all of Europe's armies in the Thirty Years' War! They did not think of that, those gaunt frontiersmen who now leaned grinning on their rifles, but they did know that the western frontier of their young republic had been established far west of its original limit at the Alleghenies. They were well content.

And John Fraser had a sudden glowing vision of all that it might mean to him—and Marie Despard!

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

Wolf Pack of the Border

The Bloody Career of the Doolin Gang

By BUCK RINGOE

Killer Bill Doolin dealt himself out of the fated Dalton play, and then ran a five-state terror game of his own—until law guns called a death-stacked showdown.

IT was no lame horse that kept the tough Bill Doolin out of that ill-fated outlaw raid on the banks of Coffeyville, Kansas, on the 5th of October in the year 1892. Horses were too cheap, too plentiful, for an excuse of that sort to be acceptable to men who knew the Daltons, and Bill Doolin especially.

No, siree! Some historians have claimed that Doolin's horse went suddenly lame on the ride to Coffeyville, and that Doolin, therefore, was not among those present in the frightful slaughter of humanity on that eventful day. Still others state that Doolin, for some personal reason, was voted out of the Dalton Gang just prior to that raid.

Well, the truth of the matter is this. Bill Doolin, as rough and reckless as any thief who ever rode the lawless trail in the early days of the western frontier, stayed away from Coffeyville because he refused to play any part in the wild drama that was staged in the explosive Kansas town on that occasion.

The night before the Dalton bunch rode into Coffeyville, they camped on the prairie

to rest their horses and take a last-minute check on the routine Bob Dalton had planned for the robbery of G. M. Condon & Company's Bank and the First National Bank. This was to be the most sensational raid of all time. Bob Dalton grinned with bold satisfaction as the conceiver of the scheme. He wanted the world to recognize him as the greatest outlaw of the entire universe.

Bill Doolin, as fierce and courageous, as reckless and daring as any of the Dalton bunch, from Bob down to the least of them, was the first to oppose Bob Dalton's ambitious design.

"You'll never do it, Bob," said Doolin, that night beside their campfire. "You ain't got a chance. Eight of us, Bob. A couple of jaspers with half an eye couldn't miss eight gents tryin' to ride outa town, even if we was able to get the money."

Bob Dalton eyed Doolin. They had ridden on many raids together. As a matter of fact it was Bill Doolin who was Bob's special running mate in their train robberies and bank stick-ups. Bob and Bill led the bunch. There was no question in any one's mind about Doolin's courage. No—he was not yellow. Then what was it?

"Yuh run yore string, eh, Bill," argued Bob Dalton. "Yuh jes' want out—on this, eh? Yuh got other plans?"

"Far as this's concerned, yeah," admitted Doolin solemnly, drawing on his cigarette and staring into the fire. "I got other plans. I'm too young to die. Show me where a gent's got a fightin' chance an' I'll go yuh, like I always done afore."

There was a grunt at this from another throat. Before Bob Dalton could voice his opinion, George Newcomb nodded his head.

"I'm sidin' with Bill," he declared. "Me, I don't savvy how in hell we could work both them banks an' miss a skinful o' lead."

Bob, the leader of the wild Dalton bunch, shrugged his broad shoulders and spat into the flames.

"Thought we was all hunky-dory on this job," he growled, and lifted his eyes to glance around at the others, including his two brothers, Grat and Emmett. His gaze fell at last on Charley Pierce, and something he saw there made him frown. "Yuh backin' down, too, Charley?" he demanded. "Say, what's this, anyway? You jaspers gangin' up to bash my plan to hell an' gawn?"

Pierce was a happy-go-lucky devil, who cared no more for his life than he cared for a tumbleweed pod. He grinned.

"Don't go gittin' riled, Bob," he cautioned. "I jus' been givin' this idea a mite o' thought. An' I can't savvy it no more'n Bill 'r Bitter Creek."

Bitter Creek was one of George Newcomb's nicknames, or aliases. He was known in other parts of the west sometimes as Slaughter's Kid. But Bitter Creek was the better known tag by which this ex-cowboy was identified.

IT was from this night, from this parting of the ways, that the story of Bill Doolin's lame horse spread far and wide. There was ground enough here, too, for the legend that the Dalton trio, with Bill Powers and Dick Broadwell, had voted out Doolin, Newcomb and Pierce. None has ever offered the yellow streak as an explanation for Doolin's absence that day from Coffeyville and death with his boots on.

Before dawn that next morning eight men mounted their freshened horses around the smoldering camp on California Creek. It was some twenty miles to Coffeyville. There was playful bantering as the men swung into their saddles, scanning the camp ground for possible trinkets equipment.

Three of the party had drawn a little way apart. It was now two distinct groups. Bob Dalton was at the head of the quintet. Bill Doolin sat stolidly in his saddle, flanked by Bitter Creek and Charley Pierce.

There was a suggestion of something grim, almost sad in the usually cold gray-green eyes of Doolin as he caught the face of Bob Dalton turned his way.

"Good luck, Bob," he said. "Luck to all o' yuh."

Dalton waved and shouted back. The five sank spurs home into eager flanks, and as many broncos dashed away across the prairie. The three left behind sat with tight rein and watched—until the

five were mere dots in the graying light of early day.

"I'm ridin'," declared Bitter Creek, suddenly. "I don't wanna be no place around here when that Coffeyville war busts out."

Pierce, too, decided that he was going to disappear for a while. Bill Doolin, chuckling softly to himself, turned on his companions. He was a tall, almost military figure of a man in his early twenties. The broad-brimmed, low-crowned sombrero was cocked low over his left eye, and his thick, wavy brown hair bushed out from beneath it. Like most of the horsemen of his times, he was lean as a foraging wolf, and his eyes bored you when he looked at you. A reddish-brown fuzz was sprinkled over his jaws this morning, much as the bunch grass dots the plain; Doolin had not shaved for more than forty-eight hours.

His comrades looked at him now, not without something akin to affection. This hard-eyed desperado had many friends, not only among the lawless elements of the plains and the frontier towns, but among ranchmen who for some strange reason sympathized with his weakness for the life of an outlaw. Doolin had once been a cowpuncher. He and Bitter Creek had worked cattle together on Old Man Halsell's H Bar X spread in the Cherokee Strip. Yes, Doolin knew many cattlemen and nesters.

"Bob is overplayin' his hand," mused Doolin, finally, just loud enough for the other two to hear. "Thinks I'm yeller, mebbe. But to hell with him. This is his finish. And now yuh watch the trail I'll lay."

"Whatcha mean, Bill?" queried Pierce. "Yuh don't. . . ."

"I mean," spat Doolin with rising enthusiasm, "that as soon as this hell-abaloo blows over, I'm organizin' fer business." There was a dancing light in the icy eyes as he shot a glance from Pierce to Bitter Creek. "If you fellers is goin' some place wherever, go ahead. Make yore dust an' let off yore steam. I'll be waitin' for yuh back on the Cimarron. You know the place."

"Shore," returned Bitter Creek eagerly, "Well, if you ain't comin', me an' Charley'll be sashayin'."

BILL DOOLIN must have had the right hunch. That Coffeyville raid by the Dalton Five was most disastrous. The echo of the battle in the wild Western town was heard all over the continent. Like a fierce storm the news broke with thunder and lightning, and the smell of gunsmoke rode the plains wind. The word caught up with Doolin as he jogged lazily along in his saddle, alone, meditating on what the future would bring.

"Bank robbers! The Dalton Gang!" Men and women cried the warning in each little town he passed. "Some of the gang escaped!"

Hard-boiled Bill Doolin heard and swung his chunky little horse off the beaten trail. He would have to avoid the towns now for a while.

"Some o' these hombres," he mused determinedly, "will mebbe remember me. I'm one o' the Dalton Gang—'r I was. Guess I better high-tail it for the Cimarron."

And so did Doolin ride. He rode like the hammers of Hades across country, striking for the ravines, the gullies, the shadowy hill trails with which the outlaw bunch was familiar. To make a brief tale of it, the former Dalton henchman split the wind for the old hide-out in the Creek Nation.

About twenty-five miles west of Tulsa, between that frontier town and Ingalls, in the wilderness that was Oklahoma Territory, the Dalton bunch had a rendezvous in a large cave, situated in a most strategic position for defense from attacking or hunting lawmen. Here Bill Doolin slid from the saddle of a lathered horse and went into hiding.

Gradually the "hoot-owlers" trailed in. Charley Pierce drifted along on a jaded mount in a month. Then came Newcomb, or Bitter Creek, who had shot his way through to the hideout.

"Hyah!" greeted Doolin and Pierce as Bitter Creek arrived. "We got three now, an' we can run a little game o' seven-up. See anybody on yore way?"

"Yuh hear about it?" countered Bitter Creek.

"Yeah," chorused Doolin and Pierce, with Bill adding, "Nobody got away did they?"

"None," grunted the Bitter gent, "but I hear on good authority Emmett is gonna live."

Doolin was a strange man, even for his day when the frontier brought together many strange characters. Doolin's reputation was as bad as any of the Daltons', the James Boys', or other notorious hold-up men of the West; he was a headstrong, hard-riding hellion whose physical courage was never questioned; whose six-shooters had ended the careers of many men. He was not a man gifted with imagination; in fact, it has been said by some historians that Doolin was not overburdened with gray matter. But, he was a man of peculiar moods. Every now and then Bill Doolin made a half-hearted attempt to take stock of himself, and when in such a mood he was known to have vowed he was going to turn over a new leaf.

The account of the finish of his former companions, and the verification of the crimson details by Pierce and Bitter Creek, sent Doolin now into one of his moods. Twirling a big six-shooter on his calloused trigger finger, he stared off across the wilderness of rock, brush and stunted trees toward the setting sun.

"We mighta been layin' there," he mumbled. "Eight of us in that row 'stead o' five." Then he remembered Emmett Dalton. "An' who in hell wants to go along livin' like that? He'll spend the rest o' his life in the pen."

"What's eatin' yuh, Bill?" demanded Bitter Creek. "Yuh ain't goin' to turn sky-pilot, are yuh?"

Doolin's hard gray eyes looked clear through his former riding pardner of the H Bar X ranch, but he did not reply. And Bitter Creek, knowing the fickle twists to which Doolin was subject, did not press the point. Instead, he and Pierce promptly set about the preparation of some food at their fire.

FOR several days they sat around watching the surrounding country for signs of approaching law officers. Finally, after a week of taking turns on guard, Charley Pierce called out one day from his nest among a cluster of rocks.

"A rider comin'," he shouted just loud enough for those in the cave to hear. "A gent on hossback from over Tulsa way. Looks like—" The approaching horseman was drawing nearer, his distination now certain, heading for the hideout. "—Keep yore heads down," called Pierce, as Doolin and Bitter Creek crept toward him. "I think this hombre is—yeah, it's Buck."

The man on the horse was now distinguishable and, being well acquainted with the region himself, raised an empty hand in token of peace and friendship. He could see no one himself, but he knew that if anyone was at the hideout, he had already been seen.

Pierce rose up from his partial concealment and waved. The other man waved back, and kept coming. In a few moments he had booted his tired horse through the rocks and halted, sitting there grinning like a savage on the war trail. It was Red Buck, all right, and the trio greeted him as befitted the natures and dispositions of each.

They now had four. Doolin's wavering mood began at once to retreat. The gathering of the bandit clan always affected him that way.

"What's goin' on, Buck?" inquired Doolin. "Wherefrom you ridin' last? The law still lookin' for us on that Coffeyville raid?"

"Naw," chuckled Red Buck, unsaddling and swabbing the sweat streaks from his animal's back with the saddle blanket. "They found out nobody got away. But I hear there's still a reward out for you, an' Pierce an' Bitter Creek—account o' that Adair trick."

When the Dalton Gang, some time previous, had successfully robbed the Katy express at Adair, Oklahoma, Doolin, Pierce and Newcomb had been members of the outlaw band. The express company, enraged at the failure of the armed guards to fight the outlaws off, posted a reward of five thousand dollars each on the heads of the gang. Doolin, Pierce and Newcomb were now the only three remaining, excepting Emmett Dalton, who, at this moment, lay near death from wounds and behind prison bars.

"Nobody'll ever collect that money on me," swore Doolin, "onless they gets me asleep an' fills me too full o' lead to move."

The reminder, however, of the law that

still pursued him, made up Doolin's mind. The old Dalton Gang was dead, or as good as that, and it would now be the Bill Doolin Gang. Already he had three good side-kicks in Pierce, Bitter Creek and Red Buck. The latter, one of the worst and bloodiest criminals of the day, was a horse-thief of considerable note. His real name was George Weightman, and he had no more scruples than a starving wolf.

"Where are yuh gonna go, Bill?" inquired Bitter Creek, who knew Doolin better than most of his comrades.

"Me! I'm stayin' right here," snapped Doolin boldly. "Let 'em try fer the reward. An' what's more, I'm runnin' this crowd from here out. We'll keep the damn law sharps so busy changin' hosses they won't have no time to sleep."

It was Bill Doolin's declaration of war against the frontier, the whole region in general, and the men who wore the badges and stars in particular. If he was a hunted man, he was going to play the game to a finish.

FROM the cave in the Creek Nation, Doolin started out as leader of the little robber gang. The cave was always their last line of defense. Between raids the gang rode for this isolated spot and rested up. Now they began a series of lightning attacks on banks, stores, ranches and railroads. Gradually, the gang increased; new members were enrolled. From the original three, who resigned from the Dalton rolls, Bill Doolin raised his band to, at times, a score of hard-riding, fast-shooting hellions.

Some of the toughest, most desperate characters the Territory ever knew became Doolin henchmen. Among these was none other than Bill Dalton, brother of the ill-starred trio who had gone down under the leaden counter-fire of the Coffeyville citizenry. Bill was a rover, as bad as any of his outlawed kin, and up to the time he joined Doolin's wild western cavalcade, had been a sort of free lance, taking a flyer with any bad men who had a robbery planned and needed a gun hand who could ride and shoot.

Another of the hard-boiled Doolin desperadoes was a fellow known only as Little Bill. This gentleman's real name was known to some of the old-timers in the West, but was, out of respect for the decent family from which he came, hushed completely, and has been lost to history. Little Bill, so the story goes, was really a well-bred, intelligent young man, a graduate of an Eastern college and the son of a fine Pennsylvania Dutch family. In the matter of "book larnin'" he was the top-rider of the Doolin platoon.

One of the gang who lived to see many of his companions go to "boot-hill" graves was Richard West, known far and wide as Little Dick. No other man in the crowd was as expert with six-shooters or long gun, as the rifle was popularly called. Little Dick was also known to have been a real cowboy and was at one time on the pay-roll of the 3-Circle ranch in Oklahoma.

"I like sleepin' in the open," Little Dick would argue with his outlaw companions. "Give me a blanket an' the blue sky every time."

Many a time during the hectic period in which the Doolin Gang terrorized the country now designated as Oklahoma and Kansas, this habit of Little Dick's saved him from the flying bullets when posses surrounded the houses where Doolin's crowd slept.

Among the other important members of the gang were Thomas Jones, better known as Arkansas Tom; John Blake, alias Tulsa Jack; Dan Clifton, whose gang nom-de-gunman was Dynamite Dick; and Bill Raidler, a wild man and a fool with his six-shooter.

The women, however, were the gang's foremost claims to notoriety.

This was the first of the western outlaw gangs whose rough membership listed the opposite sex. Three female outlaws, whose names have gone down in history as the gunfighting equals of many bad men of the same era, rode with the Doolin crowd. They were Cattle Annie, Little Breeches, and Rose of the Cimarron.

None of these three women ever looked for favors among the gang members. They took part in many of the fierce shooting raids and robberies, rode the black night trails with the law pack at their heels, and stood their ground with the men, shoulder to shoulder, and six-

shooters blazing when the time for action finally faced them.

Rose of the Cimarron had, of course, another name before she became the sweetheart of Bitter Creek, the outlaw. The family name has never been handed down, and is known now to a mere few old-timers in the West, and will be buried with them, for this unusual woman eventually turned from her career of outlawry and has been for many years the wife of a respected citizen.

The other two, Annie and Little Breeches, eighteen and seventeen years of age respectively when they joined the outlaw bunch, made reputations for themselves as full-fledged renegade wildcats, shooting to kill during the robberies, and sharing the loot on an equal basis with the men.

Compared with other females who triggered into ill-fame along the borders of our early frontier, none stand out above this trio for sheer bravado, reckless courage, and daring under actual gun fire. Belle Starr was an outlaw and leader of a gang, true enough, but Belle never clashed in real gun battle with the law. Instead, she sat back and engineered most of her raids, sending her men to do the shooting and robbing. She divided the plunder. It was a business.

Pearl Hart, whose name has been handed down to us as a bandit of the west, was a mere victim of circumstances. She could not hold a candle to this Trigger Trinity of the Doolin Gang. A couple of times she is named as having participated in stick-ups in which no shot was fired. These lawless women with Doolin knew the sting of bullets and the choking powder smoke. They were as bad as the men—some say worse—for they lived without benefit of clergy and without shame, like wild animals, hounded like a pack of wolves and fighting until the last ditch before surrender. When the last shot was fired, Cattle Annie and Little Breeches clawed and tore like panthers in the grip of the officers; spitting and snarling until they were subdued, manacled and placed where they were harmless—behind prison bars.

Such was the personnel of the Wild Bill Doolin Gang as it rode the outlaw trail to fame—and death.

II

THROUGHOUT the bitter winter and early spring the Doolin crowd made its headquarters in the cave, sallying out periodically to make a surprise raid on some tiny railroad station, a distant ranch or a bank far enough away to give them time to lay a baffling trail back to their lair.

It was October of 1892 when the Daltons ended their life story, and for some months Doolin, with his followers, avoided the rambling reward hunters. In May—exact date the 28th—1893, the grim Doolin led his gunslingers on a short journey to the town called Cimarron, Kansas. The purpose of this trip was the planned holdup of the Santa Fe train which, according to information Doolin had been able to garner, was carrying in its express car some fifty thousand dollars, mostly in gold.

Doolin had helped to stick up many trains as right-hand man with Bob Dalton. Now he was riding at the head of his own organized gang. They traveled under cover of the night. At a point close enough to the town so they could reach it without wearing down their mounts, Doolin called a halt.

"Everybody down," he called softly to his pardners. "Unsaddle an' let yore hosses rest up. Little Dick, you can stay on guard with them hosses a spell."

The outlaws slid down from saddles, loosened cinches, and stripped the wet backs of their ponies. Little Dick, dangling a ready rope with which he was a wizard, held the mounts close in the dark where they fell to grazing. Meanwhile Doolin drew his men down into a small wash and they built a fire under the protection of the rocks and brush. Seated around the guarded blaze, the outlaw chief checked the plans for robbing the train.

"Bill, here," he motioned to the brother of the dead Daltons, "'ll stick with me while we bring the engine to a halt. Savvy? Then on each side o' the track," he indicated those chosen for the gun gauntlet through which the train would roll to a stop, "you gents an' Arkansas Tom an' Red Buck 'll move in with us as we bring the engine crew back to the express car. You ketchum?"

Each man in turn had his questions to ask, and the talk went on through the night. An hour. Two hours. Doolin stared at the fire, at his fifth cigarette. Then finally at his heavy, hunting-case watch, a token, by the way, which he had acquired in a Texas store robbery some time before. Now it was time to move, and Doolin got up, stretched his rawhide, muscular body, and moved off through the dark to where he could see Little Dick by the horses.

"You, Bill?" came West's voice easily.

"Sure 'nough, Dick," replied Doolin. "You wanna go up by the fire an' ketch a li'l' warm?"

"I ain't cold none," argued West. "We ridin'?"

"Better," grunted Doolin, chucking his companion in the ribs with a heavy, gloved fist. "You think them hosses is fit?"

Little Dick made a sound that answered for "yes," and caught the forelock and muzzle of his own horse, while Doolin watched, marveling at the speed and accuracy of West's movements in the dark. With his own mount secure, Little Dick knew the others were pretty safe, and the gang was coming toward the animals, carrying saddles and blankets.

Soon the bandits were in the saddles. Far away across the darkness of the chill May night they heard the dismal sound of a train whistle.

"She's comin'," called Bill Doolin. "An' we're goin'."

One of the bunch laughed softly. It was Bitter Creek, and he spurred his horse closer to Doolin's.

"The ol' Santy Fe has got uh appointment with us," he chuckled evilly, "but she don't know it yet."

Doolin knew the trail well. He knew every inch of the plains here, and he picked the ground. Under cover of the dark they reached the location selected for the robbery. Doolin posted his men. Then he, with Bill Dalton and Red Buck, rode up the track, cautiously following the shadows along the right of way until they were at the edge of the town. Cimarron was only a cluster of squat shanty-like buildings in those days. Here Doolin and Dalton dismounted, handing their reins to Red Buck, who grunted, swung his own horse about and went back, leading the saddled animals.

NEARER and nearer came the toot of the Santa Fe locomotive. Finally the two crouching robbers could make out the sparks that shot from her smoke stack. Then came the rumble of her heavy wheels on the trembling rails, and a feeble sign of life from a lone man with the lantern, who stepped from the tiny station door. The express was on time.

Unseen at the track side, Doolin and Dalton scrambled up the iron ladders on the tender. They could peek out and see the trainman signal; see the tiny lantern wave. The panting iron horse began to move again. Chug-chug. The clank and slam of metal against metal, the snorting, coughing voice of the puffing engine, the hiss of steam valves, and they were rolling along, gathering speed.

Doolin nudged Bill Dalton. Up and over. Silently, as two bats that float through the black night, the pair appeared in the engine cab, behind the grime-smeared trainmen.

"Cut her down," growled Bill Doolin, menacingly, watching the effect of his voice on the engineer and his fireman. "Cut her down an' stop her—where I show yuh."

"What's this?" demanded the engineer, innocently. "Keep that gun away from me."

"Don't be a fool," suggested Doolin. "Slow down for a stop up ahead here where you come to the trees."

Four six-shooters covered the two engine men. The hands that held the weapons were as steady as the eyes behind them. Death was waiting inches away for its prey. The engineer cursed angrily and grabbed the brake lever as the train entered the darker shadow of the trees. With a screech of brakes the Santa Fe came to a sudden jolting stop.

Things happened swiftly then. Doolin and Dalton herded the engineer and his fireman to the ground, started them back toward the express car. Train doors creaked, windows were opened. The heads and shoulders of conductor and passengers began to appear.

The outlaw pistols prodded the crew along the side of the train. Guns roared

and bullets screamed over the roof, warning curious passengers to keep heads inside. Doolin worked fast. Along both sides of the train the outlaws popped their six-shooters.

"Hyah," called Doolin as he made out Red Buck and Arkansas Tom, coming toward them. "Give that hombre the signal." Meaning the messenger inside the express car.

Threatened by torture, and possible death by roasting in the blazing inferno of a flaming express car, the express man yielded. To the shouts of "Open up or die!" he at last flung the door back. Doolin was in there at once, gun in hand, and while you could say "Your money or your life," he had the safe's contents stowed neatly in a sack.

The rest was simple; a matter of routine. Retreating from the looted train, the Doolin bunch spread a rattling volley of warning slugs, mounted their waiting horses and made for the open country.

Angered beyond words, and helpless, the train crew backed the train to Cimarron and telegraphed for Marshal Chris Madsen. In a few hours Madsen, with a hurriedly gathered posse, took the trail. Then began a gruelling chase.

AS the lawmen closed up the distance between them and got within range, the shots began to echo across the plain. A fierce running fight started here, continued for miles across the Kansas line into the Territory, across the Cimarron River.

Madsen, a tough frontier gunfighter, and his party stuck closer than a tight boot to Doolin's trail. Both sides were shooting desperately. Somebody had to drop.

They were now in the country known as the Cherokee Strip, riding like madmen. Marshal Madsen, determined to rid the land of the renegade, Doolin, urged his horse and his comrades to greater speed. Spurring his own mount to a valiant burst of pace, the marshal shot out in front and suddenly slid the horse to a stop, dropping quickly from the saddle, his rifle ready.

From one knee he fired.

Far ahead he and his men, who were now doing the same thing, saw one of the riders sway, another ride up close and clutch at something that was passed. The loot! Who was hit? Swiftly they flung themselves again into saddles to take up the chase.

But that slight halt had counted against them. Bill Doolin, the sole victim of a posse bullet, had been hit in the right foot. Bitter Creek was near him.

"Take it," yelled Doolin, lifting the plunder sack from his saddle horn, and flinging it desperately to Bitter Creek. "I'm hit in the foot 'r the leg, I think. Ride like hell!"

Arkansas Tom, seeing what happened, swung his mount toward his chief and raced up close. Then it was that another rifle ball cut the horse from beneath the slowing Doolin. Arkansas paused long enough to snatch Doolin from the ground, set him aboard his own horse and remount, to go dashing away, riding double, into the cover toward which they were then aiming.

"Thanks, Arkansas," panted Doolin, who clung grimly while blood dripped from his boot. "Make for the H Bar X."

"That's what I'm doin'," answered Tom, sneaking a look over his shoulder at their pursuers.

Madsen's posse followed hard and fast, but when they reached the wild jumble of scrub and rocks, a region of tangled trails and sudden barriers, they found they had been tricked and beaten. Night came on them, and in the blue dark all chance of finding the trail was lost. Doolin's gang had ridden strangely into nowhere.

Arkansas Tom took Bill Doolin, bleeding and swearing, to the H Bar X ranch, then located about twenty-five miles west from the town of Woodward. Here Doolin's wound was treated and he stayed in hiding, guarded by Arkansas Tom and his cowboy friends. While the law rode circle far north in the Strip, searching for their trail, Doolin, fully recovered, saddled another horse and he, with his pardner, Arkansas, rode eastward for the rendezvous in the Creek Nation.

For a period of three months, Doolin eluded his pursuers. The gang, reassembling cautiously at the cave, became emboldened by their success and what they called the "stupidity" of the law. Late in August, Doolin, with his gang, moved

into Ingalls, a mere cluster of buildings sprawled at a wide place in the trail. Here the Doolin clan proceeded to make merry with their women and their friends. And here, on the very first day of September, a posse struck like a crashing thunderbolt.

DOOLIN was completely surprised. Ingalls was far off the track for the lawmen. Nobody had seen a sign of their approach. But there they were, and surrounding the town. Leading the posse were Marshals James Masterson, brother of the famed "Bat" Masterson, John Hixon, Dick Speed, A. H. Houston and Lafe Shadley. These men, with their following, first assured themselves that they had the gang bottled up, then, calling on one of the citizens, they sent word to Bill Doolin.

"Tell him," said Jim Masterson, "that if he surrenders peaceful we'll take good care of him an' his crowd. But if he makes a fight of it, we'll fill him plenty full o' lead poisonin'."

Doolin received the message, and sent back word for the posse to go and take a quick jump into—hell.

"If you fellers are after reward money," he added, "you can come an' earn it."

That started the battle; a lead-slinging bee that still stands as one of the toughest clashes between law and outlaw our early west ever witnessed or heard about. The five marshals posted their men, and snipers began at once before Bill Doolin could gather his gang together. They were scattered around the town; some in the saloons, the hotel, some in the various houses and stores.

Doolin and Little Bill were in a saloon when the fight started.

"Make for the barn," yelled Doolin gruffly, calling across the sprawling street toward the hotel. The Rose of the Cimarron was over there with Cattle Annie, Little Breeches, Tulsa Jack and some of the others. Bitter Creek, her hard-boiled sweetheart, well "likkered," was in an upper room of a house down the street.

Bullets screamed and thudded into wood panels, crashed glass windows to splinters, and tore into flesh. From door and window the surprised outlaws fought back, watching for the moving figures of the possemen as the law closed in.

"Come on!" shouted Doolin recklessly, dashing out into the dusty roadway. "Get to the barn an' the hosses!"

With the luck of a better man, Bill Doolin dared the law guns, dodging tauntingly from post to box, from box to wagon bed, from there to the corner of a shack, leaping about, shooting fearlessly. All about him whined the grave song of lawmen's lead. From a window across the street came the stinging fire of Arkansas Tom's rifle until it was empty, then up came Tom's six-shooters. Bitter Creek, too, was shooting angrily, aiming at the darting figures that jumped from breastwork to breastwork, dodging down alleyways. Women screamed warnings and men cursed as the splattering lead cut and stung, ricocheting from walls and stones, pinging into the sturdy oaken frames of the buildings.

Here and there a horse screamed as a wild bullet found its couch in his flesh and he went down, kicking. Mrs. Pierce's hotel soon became the center of the war. Arkansas Tom was discovered to be up in that edifice, worrying hell out of Lafe Shadley's party with his six-shooters.

In the thick of the battle the Rose of the Cimarron saw that her sweetheart was in danger. George Newcomb, alias Bitter Creek, was hurt, and it looked as if he had shot himself clean out of ammunition. The Rose, flinging caution to the four winds, raced upstairs in the hotel, secured Bitter Creek's reserve ammunition and his extra rifle and six-shooter. With these she calmly let herself out of an upper window, via tied bed clothing, the arsenal clutched to her breast, and heedless of the hail of bullets that greeted her, began a mad race across the street to aid her lover.

Bullets kicked up dust around her legs, tore at her voluminous skirt, jerked at her hat, and finally one of the marksmen battered Bitter Creek's rifle from her grip, smashing its magazine. But she reached the house without a scratch.

Now the fighting grew hotter, fiercer. Step by step Doolin and his henchmen drew nearer to the barn where their horses were stabled. Once there, Bill Doolin was reckless enough to feel he could get away

in a running fight. Behind him now as he and his band edged toward the barn, rose a column of smoke. One of the posse had started a fire beside the hotel to drive out Arkansas Tom. A woman appeared on the porch.

"Stop that!" she shouted in a pleading tone. "Don't burn down my place. I ain't harmin' none o' you. What you want?"

"We want Arkansas Tom," answered Shadley. "Send him out here an' we'll kill the fire."

IT was a deal. Mrs. Pierce, a sizable woman who feared nothing on two feet or four, climbed the stairs of her hotel and found Arkansas Tom entrenched amid piles of boxes and other stored objects in her attic, where he had poked a hole through the shingles and was pot-shooting the posse. As the woman arrived, Tom had just fired his last cartridge and was cursing the lawmen in the alleys and behind buildings.

"Here you, Arkansas," snapped Mrs. Pierce, "come down outa this, an' give yourself up, peaceful. Do you want them officers to burn down my hotel just to roast you alive? What did I ever do to you that you should bring this upon me?"

The "gentleman outlaw," as Arkansas was sometimes referred to, wiped powder smoke and sweat from his mustached face, and mumbling resignedly to himself, followed the landlady down the stairs. His empty six-shooter he twirled by its guard on a bleeding finger, and he felt of himself where other bullet wounds made soggy splotches on his clothing. One of the marshals, Houston, had already died from Arkansas' shooting, and there were a half dozen of the posse wounded by his fearless fire. Now he was finished. Possemen covered him grimly with their guns. He was a good man to have out of the way; their first prisoner.

The shooting, however, was just as hot, merely moving down the street in the direction of the barn. Arkansas Tom was bound hand and foot and lashed to the hotel porch post for safe keeping. Rushing along in the wake of the law guns, his captors took up the battle.

They could see Bitter Creek, half carried, half dragged by the Rose of the Cimarron into the barn. There was Bill Doolin, calm as a June morning, picking his shots, backing, carrying on a conversation with his men as they gathered, dodging into the barn, shouting to one another. Dick Speed, a good officer and a courageous man, walked out boldly toward Doolin.

"You'll never make it, Bill," called Speed. "Drop your weapons and put up your hands."

Some of his companions called to Speed to dodge, to get behind something. But they were too late. Bill Doolin, as if he were swathed in some invisible coat of mail, stood erect in the very door of the big barn and took deadly aim at the marshal. Crash!

Dick Speed toppled head foremost to the ground, dead as a log in last year's woodpile. A volley of slugs thundered his passing, like a salute over the grave of a soldier hero. But Speed was no more, and the Doolin Gang was riding.

Swung up into saddles, the outlaw bunch swept out of the opposite end of the barn and tore away for the hills. Bitter Creek was mounted behind his sweetheart, the Rose, his arms locked around her shapely waist, while she lashed the horse in a frantic race against death.

With a cry of rage the law men reached their horses and hit the breeze.

"Run 'em down!" bellowed Marshal Shadley, as he led the chase after the fleeing robber bunch. "They can't last long, fellers. Come on!"

In the vicious running battle that followed Bill Doolin, Red Buck, Little Dick and Tulsa Jack rode as a rear guard, shooting steadily and with such galling accuracy that the posse was half unhorsed. Bill Dalton was shot from his saddle with a bad wound. Bitter Creek, losing consciousness, slipped from behind his Rose and forced the gang to slow down and recover his inert body from the roadside.

Doolin, daring death from a dozen muzzles, slid his horse to a stop and leaped down to grab up Bitter Creek.

"Go on—ride," he ordered the others including Rose. "Do as I tell yuh! I'll save him."

As the officers drew nearer on lathered horses they came upon Bill Doolin,

half standing, half crouching above the body of his pardner, Bitter Creek. Doolin was a reckless, shooting fool. And here above the body of Bitter Creek he proved it. Taking cool aim, he shocked the possemen out of saddles, killed their horses under them, and shot Marshal Lafe Shadley to death.

So scathing was Doolin's fire, so brazen his stand with bullets spattering and cutting the wind all around him, that the posse was driven off. And Doolin, aided by Tulsa Jack and Little Dick, who returned in the nick of time, hung Bitter Creek over a horse and rode away with him to escape.

III

THE deaths of Marshals Speed and Shadley, more than anything else, fixed the fate of Bill Doolin and his outlaw gang. From all parts of the West now came the cry to "get the Doolin Gang." United States Marshal Nix called in three of the frontier's most capable gunfighters and expert trailers.

These men were Bill Tilghman, Chris Madsen, already a foe of Doolin, and Heck Thomas. This trio, familiarly known to old-time Westerners as the Three Guardsmen, was detailed with a roving assignment to bring in the Doolin outlaws or bury them.

While Marshal Nix was busy conferring with the above-mentioned gunfighters, the Doolin Gang cut another notch on its six-shooter butt by killing a ranchman named Bill Stormer, who had begun a campaign to rid the range of the outlaws. Doolin and his men surprised Stormer's party in the hills near Twin Mounds, Payne County, Oklahoma, and, in a battle there, shot the leader of the citizens' committee dead.

The murder of this ranchman sent the gang on one of its long detours, during which the outlaws turned to rustling a sizable herd of cattle. The scene of this stock theft was far off their beaten track, and the gang, posing as cattlemen, drove the animals many miles to where an innocent buyer was found. With the money from this sale Bill Doolin celebrated by dodging away from the bunch and taking a wife to himself.

Oddly enough this bloody-handed renegade had fallen in love with Edith Ellsworth, the daughter of a Lawson minister. The courtship, which had been carried on between gunfighting battles and robberies, ended with their marriage in the spring of 1894.

"We'll ride to Quay, Edith," declared Bill Doolin, "and I know where there's a cabin. You can wait for me there until I get things straightened out. In a little while we can go away together an' start a little ranch someplace where I ain't known, eh?"

"Bill, if you'd only get some honest work," said his girl wife, "we could live like other folks. We wouldn't have to hide any more."

Even while he was establishing his bride in the shack at Quay, Bill Doolin was planning a series of plunder raids. And as soon as he left her he rode for a rendezvous where the gang awaited him at Rock Fort. It was here, with the whole gang assembled, that the Three Guardsmen—Tilghman, Madsen and Thomas—with a combined force of nearly sixty possemen, almost succeeded in capturing Doolin and his band. Little Cattle Annie, the riding rowdy of the tough bunch, saved their necks.

Mounted on her wiry bronco, Annie was riding back to Rock Fort from town. It was a cold day, and the air was clear, vision good for miles. Alert as usual, Annie kept her eye skinned on all sides, a habit which becomes part of an outlaw's life. Suddenly, far across the plains, she made out a party of wagons and mounted men. She noted their direction and saw that they were heading straight for Rock Fort.

Sitting her halted horse quietly, Cattle Annie gave the matter some thought. The law, she knew, was hunting Doolin and the gang. Ofttimes these sheriffs or marshals traveled in wagons. This might be one now. Deciding on her course, Annie took a sweeping view of the great plain and hill country and — there, far away at another point, she made out a tiny, crawling spot that formed itself into a second wagon party. She became alarmed and swung about in her saddle to see a thing that made her eyes bulge.

"Three o' them," snarled Cattle Annie,

digging in her spurs excitedly. "Git goin' there, hoss." And away she went a-hellin' on her race to Rock Fort to warn Doolin and the gang.

Within three minutes from the moment Cattle Annie slid up to the dugout door at Rock Fort, the Doolin bunch was saddled and high-tailing it eastward, picking an opening that presented the widest runway to freedom between the approaching posses. Riding at a breakneck pace, the gang evaded the astonished lawmen and escaped to a man.

Tilghman, Madsen and Thomas searched for miles, and finally gave up the chase, deciding to resort to ruses to draw the gang into its net. Had they but known, Bill Doolin was then leading his desperados across the Arkansas border, where the gang swept down en masse on Hot Springs with the intention of robbing a bank in that fair town.

THE day was bright and the sun warm. The town lazed in spring drowsiness. The Doolin Gang was splendidly mounted, and on their journey had discussed ways and means of shooting Hot Springs off the Arkansas map. They had rifles and six-shooters enough, too.

One man stopped them. Some old-timers declare he was Neal Brown, one time side-kick of Wyatt and Bat Masterson. Others say it was Hendry Brown, erstwhile pardner of Billy the Kid and later the city marshal of Caldwell, Kansas. Records prove that it was neither of these men. Neal Brown was on that very day riding beside Bill Tilghman. As for Hendry Brown, this gentleman was pretty dead, for he had been hung by a committee of citizens some years before. But it is of no moment now. Suffice to say that Bill Doolin and his robber gang rode into Hot Springs to loot a bank.

One of them spotted this man whose identity is lost in the dust of passing years. His reputation at the time, however, was poisonous. His six-shooters were cemetery fillers. Bill Doolin saw him. So did Tulsa Jack and Red Buck and the rest. One look was all they wanted. The strangely fearsome hombre happened to be wearing a city marshal's badge, and his pistols looked hungry.

"What's the use o' pickin' a fight here?" demanded Doolin, swinging his horse. "There's plenty other banks. Let's ride."

Following their leader's advice, the Doolin Gang rode out of town, swung north for Missouri and, on the 2nd of May, swept down with guns blazing on the bank in Southwest City.

Still smoldering inwardly with disappointment over the Hot Springs incident, the gang fell to work on the Missourians ruthlessly. Half of the gang held the horses and smoked the citizens indoors while Doolin and the others thundered into the bank. Death was at their elbow that day.

J. C. Seaborn and his brother were behind the counter, and Doolin's command of "Stick 'em up, quick!" was not responded to fast enough.

"Don't shoot," argued Seaborn firmly, but without raising his arms. "You don't. . . ."

Crash! The bellowing roar of a six-shooter filled the bank. From beside Doolin, Little Bill's big pistol panted smoke. J. C. Seaborn fell behind the counter, dead, and his brother, with a fierce cry of horror and fury, made a desperate effort to reach a gun. Little Bill's weapon burned him down in a flash, and there was no further obstacle between the gang and the safe.

"Ride for it now," charged Bill Doolin, swiping up the swag and rushing for the door and the horses outside.

"Give 'em hell!" shouted Tulsa Jack as the outlaws mounted and started away on a mad run for the hills.

Six-shooters and rifles joined in a clashing volley that shattered the soft May day. Citizens fired from behind doors and anything handy. The outlaw gang, riding like Indians, low on their ponies' necks, fired right and left at the townspeople, smashing glass, splintering doors, and drawing blood along their route.

With plunder to the extent of some $15,000, the Doolin Gang faded among the gray-green hills.

Five states were now on the prod for the Doolin Devils. The law officers of Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas rode the ranges and mountain trails hunting them. Bill Doolin's head was worth, perhaps, ten thousand dollars. The others in proportion.

Cutting wide circles around the towns where they were known, the gang made for Texas. Deputies from a dozen counties searched for them in the Osage country and around the Wichita Mountains, and while this hunt was on, Bill Doolin rode into Longview, Texas, and robbed the bank there to the tune of $50,000 worth of greenbacks.

Nobody was hurt and, as was proved later, nobody was any poorer. On returning to the gang's hideout in the cave near Ingalls, Doolin began dividing the spoils. The fifty thousand was being spread around in little piles, so much to each robber. Doolin counted slowly, painfully slow. The gang watched him, eyes sparkling. It was a rich piece of plunder. What a hell of a grand spree they could go on!

LITTLE Bill, mystery man of the gang, was there, naturally. He, too, watched the counting, until suddenly he leaned closer to his chief and reached out a hand, taking a few off the main stack of bills.

"Let me look at these, Bill," he halted Doolin, a curious expression on his face.

"What's eatin' yuh, Little Bill?" demanded Doolin. "What's wrong anyways?"

Little Bill laughed softly, a sad light in his hard eyes, and he made a sweeping gesture toward the scattered bills. His face was the picture of hopeless despair.

"The whole of it, Bill," he said to Doolin, "ain't worth a forty-five cartridge. Look. These bills are not signed. They're worthless. Toss them in the fire."

Then he turned his head and burst out with a torrent of bitter curses. The others, as the truth dawned on them, joined heartily, making the air blue with their blasphemy. It was a cruel blow to them, but the Texans had a good laugh. Doolin himself grew bitter and swore to get revenge. The gang sulked and declared a vacation. Bill is thought to have ridden by roundabout trail back to his bride at Quay. The others went roving to all points.

From here on, close packed in their order, the activities of the gang were spread over a wide territory. Sometimes they worked in pairs, sometimes the entire crowd joined in a raid on a bank, a train or the trail-town stores. Little Bill and Bitter Creek rode into Woodward late in May and robbed the station agent there of almost seven thousand dollars. As this man was also the Wells-Fargo agent the word went flashing east and west. The two thieves, however, disappeared completely, and it was later learned that they had gone to Chicago to see the World's Fair.

On their return the gang got together and worked out a deal with a man named Isaacs to pull off a "faked" robbery in Canadien City, Texas. According to accounts of this affair, Isaacs was to ship a package of money, said to be twenty-five thousand dollars, by express. The package would be in the hands of the agent at that place and the Doolin Gang was to ride in on a raid and steal it. Isaacs, then, would be reimbursed by the express company. The trick in this case was very simple; the package of alleged money would contain only old newspaper clippings. It would be a fine joke on the express.

"And I'll split the winnings with you, Bill," confided Isaacs in secret conference with Doolin and his desperados.

"One of the things we do best," laughed Doolin. "Ain't it, fellers?"

The others were laughing so hard they could not answer. The idea of getting half of twenty-five thousand for stealing a package of paper. They were eager, anxious to go through the simple motions.

Finally Isaacs passed the word that everything was "ready." Doolin, with his mounted murderers, rode into Canadien City and turned loose on the express station. Sheriff McGee, who happened to be on the job, came galloping onto the scene, his guns blazing. A free-for-all fight opened and the gang turned their weapons on McGee.

Citizens, bolstered by the sight of their sheriff in action, came to his aid.

Bullets screamed and a smoke cloud rose over Canadien City. In the running fight that followed, the sheriff died from a Doolin bullet, and the gang, harried on all sides, had to ride for it into the hills. In the excitement which ensued the express package in question was found to contain only paper, and Mr. Isaacs went to the penitentiary convicted of attempted swindle.

THUS was another Doolin Gang job bungled, and the news of their appearance brought Bill Tilghman and other officers hot on their track. Almost from that day the outlaw fate was sealed.

Doom rode them down one by one. Splitting up, as was their custom after each job, the desperados ran like hunted wolves for cover.

Tilghman, with a deputy named Burke, cornered the three women, Rose, Cattle Annie and Little Breeches. A fierce gun fight answered the call to surrender. Tilghman, one of the greatest of our frontier peace officers, maneuvered the outlawed women into wasting their ammunition and, signaling Burke, they rushed the trio. After a vicious hand-to-hand struggle they managed to manacle them all. With the women captured, convicted and sent away to prison, the gang was run down with swift certainty.

Bill Dalton came next. Again a woman was the means. Marshal Loss Hart, trailing Bill's wife, found the house near Ardmore, where the last of the Dalton bad boys was hiding. Bill, so they say, was in the house, upstairs, when Marshal Hart reached the place, and, believing that he could escape by the back window, dropped out quietly just as Hart turned the corner of the building. Like lightning, Hart's six-shooter was jerked from the holster. Crash! Dalton was in midair when the bullet crushed his heart and he was dead when he struck the ground.

That was June, in 1895. Doolin and his bunch were now on the dodge in earnest. Bill Tilghman, trailing them, stepped into a dug-out camp on the Rock Fort ranch and found himself the helpless target of about a dozen six-shooters and rifles, covering him from curtained bunks along two sides of the room. How the officer ever emerged from there alive has long been a mystery to Westerners. But he did and not a shot was fired, though it has been said that Red Buck fought fiercely with Doolin to be allowed to shoot Tilghman in the back as he walked out of the place.

Tilghman, however, was to live to capture Doolin single-handed. When he left the ranch he returned to his headquarters to gather reinforcements. And the gang broke out into the open. Month after month they were hunted. Many skirmishes were engaged in. Finally, Chris Madsen, with Deputies Morris, Eichoff, Prater and Bill Banks, caught up with a bunch of the outlaws at a ford on the Cimarron after chasing them all the way across country from Dover, Oklahoma, where the gang had held up a Rock Island train.

Madsen hemmed the outlaws in where the going was slow, and opened fire. A blistering pitched battle ensued. Tulsa Jack and Pierce were knocked out of saddles, badly wounded. But the gang managed to escape. Madsen crossed trails with Tilghman and Heck Thomas and passed the word to them. Thomas rode on swiftly to head the outlaws off.

Ranchers were informed and warned. Traps were set. In July Charley Pierce and Bitter Creek rode into one of these and before they could do any damage the ranchers finished the criminal careers of this pair.

It was September before Tilghman caught up with Little Bill at Sam Moore's ranch near Pawhuska, in the Osage Nation. The meeting was not a happy one for the outlaw. Tilghman ordered him to put his hands up.

"To hell with you," snarled Little Bill, grabbing for his hardware. One shot he let go, then Tilghman fired. But the marshal's load was buckshot and it downed Little Bill like a load of stone. They put what remained of him in the penitentiary and eventually he was pardoned. But he was a cripple always.

Tilghman, however, was after Doolin, and in December the officer journeyed to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where he had heard Doolin was bathing for rheumatism. Sure enough. The story of Tilghman's capture of Doolin at this place is well known and need not be retold. The marshal, with the advantage of complete surprise and a coolness which made him a monumental figure on the frontier, arrested Doolin without firing a shot and brought him back to Guthrie.

"I'm not gonna like this place," decided Doolin with cool good humor as he was put behind bars. "I'm damned if I'm gonna stay here, either."

NOR did he. Doolin, according to his chroniclers, was an odd combination. From the moment he entered the jail he became the most popular prisoner. He entertained the guards and officials with funny stories and kept them all laughing and marveling at the light-hearted personality of the hard-riding killer. In one of these laughing spasms a certain guard found himself in the iron grip of Bill Doolin's gun hand, said hand reaching through the bars. A six-shooter was jerked from the guard's holster, cells were unlocked at the muzzle of the thirsting weapon, and Doolin, with a half score other prisoners, broke out to freedom.

The alarm was sounded far and wide. A dozen officers started in pursuit. Heck Thomas followed no trail but rode straight for the cabin at Quay where Doolin's wife waited with their baby son. Thomas knew the measure of his quarry, and it was he who, when Doolin, under cover of early night, sneaked into the shack and made hurried plans for his wife and son to join him in a race to freedom, waited patiently for the young woman and her child to be out of the way. He watched them from the brush as they packed a wagon; saw the woman climb up and Doolin hand her the baby. Then past him in the gloom he saw Edith Doolin drive toward the springs where he was sure Bill had plotted to meet her.

A few moments later, Doolin himself came again out of the cabin. His rifle was now in his hand, and his deadly six-shooter close to his fingers in its holster. Heck Thomas saw him coming toward him. Doolin must have sensed something, for he came cautiously alert, his eyes watchful. Thomas, like most reckless law officers of his time, gave the desperado a chance.

"Put up your hands, Bill," called the marshal from behind the brush.

Doolin's rifle spat fire and lead. Thomas' scatter gun thundered and Doolin grunted, falling dead. Two shots in the night and then the outlaw terror of five states was no more.

At the news, ranchmen sighed with relief; railroad and express companies, banks and merchants nodded their worried heads with grim approval. Bill Doolin was dead? Good. All outlaws should die as they had lived, by the bloody bullets. But now for the remaining members of the gang. What of them?

Tilghman himself shot it out later with Bill Raidler and put an end to that renegade's ruthless character. Red Buck was surrounded by a posse of angry gun-fighting citizens who dared him to come out of his hide-away shack "a-smokin'." Buck was accommodating. Six-shooters in hand, he emerged, yelling like an Indian and firing wildly. But he made only two steps and died.

Little Dick, who broke away for a while and formed an outlaw organization of his own which he called the Jennings Gang (including Al and Frank Jennings, and Pat and Morris O'Malley—two sets of brothers, of whom Al Jennings won the most ill-fame) was finally trailed by Tilghman and Thomas to a ranch on Turkey Creek. Little Dick died with his six-shooter half-drawn.

Arkansas Tom, who was captured in the fierce fighting at Ingalls, went to prison, where he served seventeen years of a life term and was pardoned. For a while Tom rode a straight trail, then a few years later he returned to outlawry. With some companions of his ilk he robbed a bank in Ashbury, Missouri, made a race of it for Joplin with the posse after him, and was downed for all time in the gun battle that started as soon as the pursuit overhauled him.

So passed the Bill Doolin outlaw gang. Of the score of hard-boiled young men who rode with this terror of the Oklahoma Territory, only one, Little Bill, finally died in bed. Theirs was a wild life, filled with rough adventures. Crime was their profession, and the end of the criminal is inevitable. They lived the life of hunted animals; they rode with their chins on their shoulders, and they died at last with their faces in the dust.

HANG AND RATTLE!

A Novel of Covered Wagon Destiny

By M. HOWARD LANE

Through prairie hell and the perilous passes of the Rockies, Yuba Crane kept the Conestogas rolling westward—to find bullet-welcome in the Land of Promise!

THEY were still a long way from California, but the train was well found and Yuba Crane felt confident that all those ninety folk in the forty tall Conestogas rolling along behind him would reach the promised land he'd told about in his letters home.

Letters, Yuba reflected with a wry grin, that were responsible for this westward trek of Missourians. He had penned them to Natalie Marshall, and she had made the mistake of letting her father, Abel Marshall, lay hands on the missives. And he, with a newsman's flair, had embellished them a bit and printed them in his weekly newspaper, the Settlement *Clarion*. Like words of gospel from the lips of a sage, they had fired the imaginations of Settlement's citizens. Yuba had found the town aflame with excitement on his return from California.

But that was not all Yuba Crane had found in Settlement. Little Abel Marshall, his shoulders humped with grief, had silently led the big sandy-haired Argonaut to Settlement's cemetery. He had showed Yuba a neat tombstone.

"Natalie died with fever, boy, while you were on the way home," he had said, standing there. "She passed on with your name on her lips, leavin' me a message to tell. Yuba, boy, she didn't want her dying to stop you in your tracks. She wants for you to keep living, keep going ahead. A body gains nothing by looking backward. And figgerin' thataway, I took it on myself to organize a company of Settlement folk that are hankerin' for a sight of that poor man's paradise you wrote us about in Californy. Will you lead us back there, boy?"

With his heart turned to ashes, Yuba had nodded slowly. "I might as well. There's nothing in Settlement for me now."

A callow youth of twenty, he had answered the cry of gold that had echoed around the world in '49. *"Oro!* Gold! Gold at the grass roots. Gold in the gravels of a thousand streams. Gold in the Sierras. Gold!"

That call had led Yuba Crane to Downieville on the Yuba River. A river that bore his own name. There had been something prophetic about that. And on the Yuba, at Coffin Bar, and at China Gulch, he'd had his share of luck.

But it was not the yellow gold in the pan that had fascinated him most. No, the thing that had caught his farmer's eyes had been the rich black soil of the Yuba River bottomlands. Soil that would be there long after the gold was stripped from every bar. And with his own *oro,* Yuba had bought acres and acres of those bottomlands in the four years that he had remained in the golden state. Now he was returning to those leagues of land that he'd written home about. Land that would bloom under the magic of a plow.

From Settlement, by packet up the Missouri to Independence, they had come. Outfitting there, the train had started its wheels rolling westward along the Overland Trail. Now they were in the heart of the vast plains beyond the North Platte, and the Rockies, the Shining Mountains the Indians called them, lay like a low bank of blue haze along the far horizon.

They would cross South Pass in three more weeks, Yuba figured, if nothing delayed them. Then he heard a sound that stiffened him in his black Spanish saddle. It came from ahead, beyond a low prairie ridge. Listening, Yuba heard it again—the faint crackle of rifle-fire!

Tall, lithe in his buckskin plainsman's garb that he had found to be the most serviceable trail wear, Yuba sat his big gray horse for a moment longer. That distant rifle-fire could indicate only one of two things. Either a caravan ahead had

Yuba moved toward the Hangtown miner. "All we want is the same chance the rest of you had, when you came to California. And by damn, we're goin' to get it!"

come on a herd of buffalo and was taking meat, or a war-party of hostile Indians had a train surrounded.

Yuba glanced back across his shoulder. The Settlement company was coming on all right. The forty Conestogas were strung out over a mile or more of trail behind him, like a great disjointed serpent. Not even Abel Marshall, driving the lead wagon, had heard the sound of gun-fire above the rattle of dry fellowes and the creak of lynch pins.

Yuba came to his decision. There was no use in alarming his fellow travelers until he discovered the cause of the shooting. He jerked his wide-brimmed hat from his tawny-hued hair. Marshall answered his wave, and nodded as Yuba pointed ahead. It was enough to let his partner know that he was going to investigate something that lay beyond the next ridge.

Yuba put his gray trail-horse into a run. He drop-reined the animal below the ridge line, and covered the last distance on foot. Crouched in the tall prairie grass so that his figure would not be silhouetted, Yuba peered across the ridge.

Green-gray, the prairie stretched away on all sides. Whipped by the afternoon breeze, the grass waved across the swells of the plain, like the incessant rolling of the Pacific that lay beyond the Rockies and Sierras. There was vast grandeur in the scene, but Yuba did not see it. Instead, his gray eyes chilled as he took in the nightmare dream of all west-bound emigrants.

A HALF mile ahead in the bottom of the next prairie swale stood a Conestoga, tilt billowing in the breeze. Twin puffs of smoke came from behind one front wheel. As he stared at the puffs amazement tightened his shoulders. Only two rifles were down there. Two rifles to hold off the attack of fifty Dakota warriors!

Words came involuntarily to his lips. "They haven't got a chance if we don't get help to them right quick!"

As he spoke a war chief signaled with his white battle shield, and Yuba saw the circle of hard-riding warriors tighten about the doomed wagons. A cloud of arrows sped from their short bows.

Yuba squirmed back out of sight. At a run, he reached the gray. Low in his saddle, he started his race against time, and as he rode a pair of questions pestered him. How, he asked himself, had that wagon ever got separated from its own caravan? What kind of captain would leave one lone Conestoga behind on this death infested strip between the Platte and Rockies?

"Mebbe if we're able to save those folks I'll get the answer," Yuba muttered.

He drew to a sharp halt alongside Marshall's wagon.

"What's up?" the *Clarion* editor yelled. He was a diminutive man, in boots, clothes, and hat that looked too big for him. White hair curled about his ears, and luxuriant burnsides bushed out from his leathery cheeks. He looked like a sharp-faced terrier and he had all of a terrier's courage.

"Fifty Dakotas got a wagon surrounded up ahead," Yuba called. "Cut out that mule you're riding, and grab your twin-bore!"

At each Conestoga, Yuba repeated his call to arms, and men he had schooled since leaving Council Grove for just such an emergency as this wasted no time.

In minutes they were all gathered at Marshall's Conestoga. Yuba faced them, quickly noting their armament. As silent as himself, their bearded faces implacable, the Missourians faced their young leader.

This was Indian territory, in the year of 1854, and fellowman helped fellowman here. Death might be waiting for some of them up ahead, and yet none of the Settlement men showed fear. The only trouble was that some of these Missourians might be too brave, brave to the point of recklessness.

"What's holding us up?" Abel Marshall demanded in his sharp voice. "There's thutty of us, and that ought to be enough to roll them damn Dakotas back to the Rockies!"

Yuba smiled mirthlessly. Marshall's speech reinforced his thoughts of a moment before. "We're holdin' up because you fellows have to know what you're up against," he said quietly. "Just remember that a Dakota can plant three arrows in a circle the size of your hat while you're loading one ball. They know that, and

we'll pay off in blood if we try and rush them."

"We ain't going to let them folks get scalped, blood or no blood!" Abel Marshall snapped.

Yuba shook his head at his fiery partner. "Not if we can help it," he agreed, "but neither do we want any widows crying themselves to sleep tonight. Figuring thataway, I've mapped out a plan. When we get to the ridge, half of us will go over. Abel, you string out the rest, and ride single-file just close enough to the top so those Dakotas can see your heads. Ride like hell for a hundred yards, then circle back out of sight and do it over again. I'll be missin' the mark mighty far if that don't make those braves think we've got a big party held in reserve."

Abel Marshall's black eyes snapped as he studied their grim-faced leader. "Boy, ye learned a thing or two crossin' these plains before," he exclaimed. "Come on, you Settlement men. We'll make them danged Injuns think a whole army is waiting to ride them down if they don't skedaddle!"

Yuba nodded. He led the way at a gallop. Snugging his thigh was one of Samuel Colt's big cap-and-ball Navy revolvers. He drew the gun and fired one shot as he led the charge across the ridge.

Down below, the Dakotas heard that shot, and turned their eyes toward the ridge, which was what Yuba wanted them to do. He watched the warriors re-form their line to face this fresh menace.

A smooth-bore boomed behind Yuba while they were still out of range. The sound whipped him around in his saddle, temper tightening his lips.

"Hold your fire," he blazed at the Settlement men. "Empty guns won't stop arrows!"

Arrows were coming now. Yuba heard one hiss like an aroused snake close to his ear. He was close enough to see the paint that glowed on high-cheeked faces. He fired once and saw a hawk-beaked visage turn red with blood.

A savage thought made him grit, "I wish you were the skunk who deserted this outfit!"

Another arrow bedded itself with a sodden thud into the high cantle of Crane's saddle. The fight was getting hot. Yuba wondered why the warriors didn't break. There'd be dead men and plenty if they didn't. Wasn't Marshall carrying out his orders? Yuba dared not glance behind to see. Then in front of him the thing he had hoped for happened.

White shield and pennoned lance held high, the leader of the Dakotas signaled to his warriors. Yelling their defiance, they wheeled away suddenly, a line of hard-riding figures streaking toward the horizon.

Yuba signaled his own men to halt. Sweat was dripping into his eyes. It wasn't fear of death waiting in arrows and lance which had brought it to his brow. It was the fear of what would happen to the green bunch of emigrants in the long train behind him. His job was to see them through. With his own love gone, his future meaningless, he had dedicated his life to the task of getting the Settlement train to California.

THE Missourians were reining in about his gray now. One big Settlement farmer looked a little pale about the lips. He grinned shakily. "We were shore makin' up to a right pert shindig," he said in a nasal drawl, "and fer one, I'm just as glad now that she didn't come off. Buckin' Nature behind a plow is one thing—buckin' men that are ready to kill ye is something else! I'm just hopin' we got here in time to save them folks in that wagon."

"We done that, all right," another Missourian muttered. "I can see somebody a-crawlin' out from behind that off front wheel."

Yuba looked toward the Conestoga ahead of them and his eyes widened with involuntary surprise. Two women in billowing skirts stood beside the wagon now, waving sunbonnets at them.

"Glory be," Yuba heard a Settlement man, Ben Clark, sigh. "Two petticoats! I hope they ain't good lookers. If they be, my old woman won't let me out of her sight 'tween here and Californy!"

Yuba smiled at Clark's comments, but his lips were straight again when they drew near the battered prairie schooner, for his eyes had already picked out the bulky shape of a dead man lying in the shadow cast by the wagon's high tilt. The

worst of it was that the emigrant's death was unnecessary. This Conestoga should never have been deserted here. But there'd be time enough to talk of that later. Right now these women needed what comfort they could give them.

The elder of the pair was crouched over her dead husband, tugging vainly at the arrows pin-cushioning his body. She raised a tear-washed face to Yuba as he reined to a halt alongside her.

"Ma'am," Yuba held his hat in his big hands, "you better let some of us tackle that chore."

It was the younger of the two women who answered Crane as he stepped down from the gray. Her voice was dull, rough-edged from the powder fumes she had breathed.

"You're mighty kind," she said. "I—I guess dad wouldn't have felt so bad about dying if he'd known help was coming."

Yuba looked at the girl, and his first impression was of enormous eyes in an elfin face. Eyes that were as dark as the black powder smudges on her white cheeks. He noted that horror had given the girl's lips a bitter, down-curving twist, and he realized with curiosity growing in him, that it had taken more than this battle and loss of her father to put it there.

Bronze-hued hair that long since had lost its sheen straggled across the girl's forehead. She reached up now with a woman's instinctive gesture to rearrange it, and Yuba noted that her arm was little more than skin and bones. Her body, too, beneath its shapeless brown calico, seemed flat. And yet Yuba had the feeling that she had not always looked this way. Once the emigrant girl had worn nice clothes and her face and figure had been lovely as any. She was another casualty of the Trace—the Overland Trail had robbed her of beauty, and now of her father.

The girl was studying Yuba Crane as intently, and she was seeing in the lithe six-footer a kindliness and a strength many men lacked. He was beard-stubbled, and the dust of travel had caked thickly along the clean-cut line of his jaw and about his firm, wide lips. It was his eyes, though, set wide on either side of a big straight nose, that attracted her most. The gray of them mirrored some deep hurt. Something she could not understand, and yet it was something she knew even now that she would try and erase.

The brazenness of her own thoughts brought a little color to her cheeks. She held out her hand, and Yuba took it gravely.

"My name is Celia Brandon," the girl said, "and this is my mother, Julia. I —we don't know just how to thank you, Mister—"

"Crane," Yuba said, and flushed as he realized that he had held the girl's hand over-long. To hide his confusion, he turned to the bunched Missourians who had not dismounted.

"You fellows ride back and bring up the wagons," he directed. "If I remember right, there ought to be a stand of trees and a spring across the next rise. We'll circle there for the night. Meantime I'll stay with these folks and see what shape their wagon is in."

As the Missourians rode off, Julia Brandon looked up from where she still crouched beside her husband.

"Oh, the wagon will roll," she said in a low, bitter tone. "My Tom got it fixed just before those Indians found us here. But it's taken two days, and Rood Carper wouldn't wait."

Yuba understood what had detained them as his swinging glance took in a pile of hickory shavings and the broken spindle of an axle. The sight made his blood boil. Such accidents were common on the long trek. Laying over while new axles were fashioned or spare ones installed was an accepted part of overland travel. His rising anger made Yuba's voice harsh.

"You mean," he demanded, "that this Carper wouldn't hold up while you fixed that axle?"

JULIA BRANDON nodded. She, too, had once been beautiful, but now there was heartbreak in her face and voice.

"We're from St. Louis," she began. "Tom had a good mercantile business there, but so many folks talked to him about how much money the storekeepers were making in California that he just up and sold the business right out from under us. He loaded this wagon, bundled me and Celia into it, and traipsed to In-

dependence. Pa was no plainsman, but when we reached Council Grove he managed to hook up with Rood Carper."

"They only had ten wagons," Celia Brandon seemed anxious to take up the story, "but there were five men for each of them. That made a party of fifty. I —I didn't like them, but father said they were Missourians like us, and Missouri men were the salt of the earth."

"We found out different soon enough," Mrs. Brandon said dismally. "Only it was too late then to turn back. Celia didn't have a minute—"

Yuba felt the corners of his lips start to tingle as they always did when he got mad. He knew now the reason for the hidden horror he had seen in the girl's eyes. "Go on," he said tersely.

Mrs. Brandon shrugged. "When the axle broke," she said dully, "Rood Carper gave Tom his choice. He'd hold up the train until it was fixed if Celia would marry him! Otherwise they'd go on without us!"

It was easy to see the family's choice, Yuba thought bitterly. Tom Brandon had valued honor more than life. Looking from the dead man to the women, Yuba said slowly, "The devil reserves a particular corner in Hell for gents like Rood Carper!"

Later, as evening shadows softened the outlines of the plain, Yuba stood with bared head at the foot of Tom Brandon's prairie grave. All the Settlement company were gathered about the mound of earth. Celia Brandon's dark eyes watched the tall, young Argonaut as he spoke a simple verse from the black prayer-book in his hand.

When he finished, Yuba sensed that all the company were waiting for him to say something more.

For a moment he bowed his head in reflection. He knew what was in the minds of the Settlement emigrants. They were remembering that he, too, had lost a loved one, and some of the knowledge that he had gained from his own despair was in his voice as he spoke again.

"Friends," Yuba said quietly, "death is something we all have to face on a trip like this. Tom Brandon ain't the first man to find a prairie grave alongside the Overland Trail. He'll be joinin' a mighty fine company in paradise!

"Right now," he went on, "it looks like he died for nothing. It always looks that way. I know. But in the big scheme of things mebbe there was a reason for his dying. There's always some brave ones have to take that chance or the world wouldn't advance much. We're going to a new land. It'll mean promise for some, and mebbe heartbreak for others. I'm hoping you Brandons will find a new life in California. I'm hoping all of us will. Let's remember that looking backward never solved any problems. Folks, we're going on, we're going ahead. Hang and rattle, and we'll come out on top!"

Celia Brandon found her way to Yuba and Abel Marshall's wagon later that same evening.

The *Clarion* editor, hunkered on one side of the fire, saw her first, and scrambled awkwardly to his feet. "Gotta get a fresh pail of water," he mumbled. "We're all out." Then he proved himself a liar by stumbling over the camp bucket and spilling its full contents across the hard-packed ground.

Yuba stretched with the lazy, tawny grace of a mountain cougar and rose to meet the approaching girl. He grinned at his diminutive partner. "Guess we do need some water at that!" he said dryly.

Celia's gaunt cheeks looked pink to Yuba as she came into the firelight. The girl halted directly in front of him. "Seems like I'm always trying to thank you for the wonderful things you're doing for me and mother," she said softly.

Yuba took her hands. He bent his head to look down at her. "You don't need to thank me for a thing, Celia," he said gravely. "Save such talk until after I meet up with Rood Carper!"

Returning from the spring, Abel Marshall heard those quiet words, and to him they seemed to ring with a note of prophecy.

OTHER prophetic words had been spoken that night, as the Settlement folks were to remember. Yuba Crane had told them to look ahead—to hang and rattle. In the following days that bunched into months "hang and rattle" became a slogan. The shouted phrase helped strain-

ing men boost creaking wagons over high South Pass in the Rockies. A sleet storm riddled canvas tilts there, and soaked supplies and bedding. Sickness brought misery to some, but they kept the wheels rolling.

ROLLING on down the Rockies to Green River. A swollen stream faced them there. Many had been unable to see a way across the barrier, but Yuba, out of the store of knowledge he had gained on his first crossing of the plains, taught them to calk boxes of their Conestogas, and ferry the wagons across behind swimming oxen and mules.

"They don't call these wagons prairie boats for nothing!" he had told them.

Another hazard faced the train as the trail brought them in sight of the Wasatch range. Rains had soaked the country and turned solid ground into a bottomless marsh. Again Yuba showed them how to keep the wheels turning. With axes swinging, he had set the men and boys of the caravan to cutting brush and trees. A corduroy road came from that, and parties following the Settlement train in that year of 1854 blessed the men who built it.

Too much water had been a curse, but travel-weary emigrants learned that too little water was even worse. They learned it on the wide reaches of the Nevada desert, with the Sierras hanging far in the distance, a beacon to pull them onward.

Only now the crest of those same Sierras was at hand. To weary men, and women and children, it was something almost incredible. Two thousand tortured miles lay behind them. And soon ahead they all would see California's golden valley, the Sacramento!

Though he was riding a few hundred yards in advance of the Conestogas, Yuba could hear the joyous shouts of the children, and the excited chatter of women as they spread the tidings. "The Sacramento! The Sacramento! We'll be able to *see* it soon!"

Abel Marshall came jouncing up on a jug-headed mule. His wrinkled, homely face had bronzed during the months they'd left behind, and his eyes, grown near-sighted from setting type, were clear and brighter now. Even the white bush of his carefully trimmed burnsides seemed more luxuriant.

"Ain't a one of the folks got a regret, now we're here," he chuckled. "Why, they're even making jokes about how they had to suck bacon rinds crossing the Nevady desert to keep the spit flowin' in their mouths!"

Yuba looked at the little editor, one sandy brow cocked. "We're apt to get a look at the Sacramento before dark," he agreed, "but that's not the Yuba River and the poor man's land that's brought us here. It's still two hundred miles away," he cautioned. "But I reckon the worst is behind us. Tell the folks they can whoop it up tonight. They've earned a celebration!"

A shout that came winging down from the granite and pine-studded ridge to their right interrupted him. Yuba swung his eyes that way, and instantly checked his gray trail horse.

Picking a way down through the pines was a party of a dozen men. Some were mounted, some were driving pack-burros laden with picks, shovels and gold-pans. In Hussar boots, corduroys, and red shirts for the most part, they came on at a fast pace. Each man carried either rifle or side-arm. Studying the group, Yuba saw some hands drop to loosen Colts wedged hard in holster-leather.

"What do you make of this?" Marshall asked tensely.

A small chill wind of premonition touched Yuba between the shoulders. "I'll see," he said tersely. "Get back to the wagons and tell them to hold up."

He rode a few paces to meet the miners as Marshall turned back toward the stained Conestogas. He lifted one buckskinned arm in a friendly salute. The gesture was not returned as the miners drew to a halt a dozen feet in front of him.

For a second, as silence held, they studied the tall man on the gray horse. Yuba returned their scrutiny, trying to figure the reason for their antagonism. He watched a brown-bearded man, who was a veritable giant, lean forward in his saddle and fold his red-shirted arms on its horn. The man spat insolently through his beard.

"Yore outfit from Missouri?" he asked abruptly.

Yuba felt a frown gathering on his forehead. "Yes," he admitted quietly. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Us Californians," the giant miner said deliberately, "ain't got much use for Missourians. And we'll back said remarks with guns, knives or bull-whips!"

THE words hit Yuba like a blow to the solar-plexus. He reined the gray forward an involuntary pace. "Now wait," he began.

Rifles swung to center him. Colts whipped into calloused palms. Their muzzles were like black, implacable eyes looking at him.

Again the brown-bearded giant was the one to speak. "If there's any waitin' to be done, your outfit had better do it," he said succinctly. "You've 'seen the elephant,' now git them wagons cramped around and haid back for home. We ain't hankerin' to do ye harm, but none of your breed is welcome in Californy."

"Not welcome?" Yuba echoed.

Nobody answered him. Guns were back in holster leather now, and the miners were riding and walking on down through the pines. Yuba watched them go. He heard two horses coming from the caravan, but like a man made of stone he sat motionless. Another sound came to him —the music of rattling wagon wheels and crackling whips. It brought the realization that all the Settlement folk had watched those miners ride on, and now they figured with complete confidence that he had solved whatever problem had arisen.

But he hadn't! He didn't even know what had turned those miners hostile. All the brightness was gone from the day suddenly, and the Yuba River seemed a long way off.

"What did them jaspers want?" Abel Marshall asked curiously, for he and Celia Brandon were the couple Yuba had heard approach from the train.

"They told me," Yuba spoke slowly as he tried to adjust his thoughts, "that we'd 'seen the elephant' and now it was time to turn back!"

"What did they mean?" Celia demanded. Her voice had gained a mellow vibrancy in these months on the trail. A warmth that spoke of fears forgotten, of a new interest in life. But now, suddenly, the fear was back again.

"That's what they call crossing the plains," Yuba told her. "You've 'seen the elephant' when it's all behind you. Most folks like to brag about it when they get here."

But Marshall, with a newsman's ability to strike to the crux of a matter, broke in. "Turn back?" he barked. "Why, damn their insolence! I'd like to know what's wrong with Missourians?"

Yuba had already made his decision. "Celia," he glanced at the girl, "ride back to the wagons and tell Sam Polk there's a meadow a half mile or so down this slant where the stock can find good graze. Tell him to make camp there."

Celia Brandon had edged the brown mare she was riding in front of the two men as Yuba talked. Her bronze hair had regained its luster in the months on the trail, and healthful color glowed in her cheeks. Her dark eyes, too, had regained their original sparkle, but they were dull now.

"You're going to follow those men," she accused. "If—if you do there may be trouble. And—and if there is, I—I want to be with you!"

Her voice faltered and she dropped her gaze, but not before Yuba saw something in her eyes that he had tried hard to overlook almost since the hour of their first meeting. He had tried unsuccessfully to tell himself that the girl was only grateful for what they had done, but he couldn't make himself believe that now. Nor could he find the words to tell Celia that his love had died with a girl in far-off Settlement.

Those things he couldn't tell her roughened his voice. "There'll be more trouble if we don't follow them," he said harshly. "I can't lead forty wagons into trouble, blind. Reckon it's nothing we won't be able to straighten out, though." He tried hard to bring a note of cheerfulness into his voice, and failed. "Just you run on back to camp," he went on, "and don't say anything to the rest of the folks. We don't want to spoil Settlement's first sight of the Sacramento!"

The tangy odor of burning pine-cones came wafting through the tall trees to them before they had traveled two miles. Mar-

shall caught the scent as quickly as Yuba and reached under his coat ostensibly to adjust his suspenders.

His action did not escape Crane's notice, and the first smile since they'd met the miners touched his lips. "Abel," Yuba said affectionately, "that pop-gun you carry under your arm is goin' off one of these days, and blow a hole 'tween your ribs I could drive a plow through."

Abel Marshall let loose of his cherished hide-out derringer as though it were a rattler.

"Dang it, we got to find out what's agin us, boy," he grumbled. "Even if it's over gun-sights!"

Yuba made no reply because he knew that Abel Marshall was speaking the cold, hard truth. Through the gathering dusk he sighted a campfire glowing cheerily in a clearing circled by pine and cedar.

"We're comin' in, gents!" he called, and watched a shadowy figure leap toward stacked weapons. The sight brought a feeling of unreality. When first he had reached California anybody had been welcome—from Australian convicts to French harlots gathered in Paris and shipped to San Francisco by public subscription. Now good American citizens were barred. Missouri men, salt of the earth!

GUN muzzles faced them as they walked their mounts into the camp. Yuba faced the menace with a half-smile that had no humor in it. Then deliberately, he unbuckled his gun-belt and slung it and his Colt about the saddle-horn. His gray eyes singled out the brown-bearded man who had spoken for the miners that afternoon. Alongside the giant, Yuba looked like a stripling boy as he stepped down from his saddle.

"My name is Yuba Crane," he said quietly, "and this fellow with me is my partner, Abel Marshall. He's got a Washington flat-bed printin' press in our wagon. Aims to start a newspaper in Downieville. Me, I already own considerable property there. Good bottomlands along the river where I plan to do some farming. You see, I saw the elephant in '49 along with you and a lot other folks. Went home to Settlement, Missouri, first part of this year, and nobody was objectin' to us Missiourians then. I'm hankerin' to have you tell me why we've turned into pizen so danged sudden."

The giant was plainly puzzled. The ring of truth had been in Yuba Crane's words. However, there were good solid ways to test a man's worth. Ways that left nothing in doubt. A laugh started to rumble in the giant's chest.

"Crane," he drawled, "folks call me Grizzly. Just plain Grizzly Jim Jones. I'm right handy at sparrin', and I'm hankerin' for some exercise. If you feel like obligin' me, I'll lay yuh a leetle side bet. Whup me, and what grievances us Californians got agin you Missourians I'll tell you. Now," he leveled a knobby finger at Yuba, "iffen I whup you, you've got to turn that train of yores back across the Divide. Whar you go from there I don't keer, but it won't be to this part of the country!"

Yuba's eyes had begun to light, for he had read what was in the giant's mind. He was peeling off his buckskin shirt before the other finished speaking.

A gleam of admiration came into Grizzly Jones' eyes as he saw the ripple of long smooth muscles beneath Yuba's bronzed skin.

"Glory be," he chuckled, "I may get a leetle exercise at that!"

The miner rushed on the remark, hoping to catch the Missourian off guard, and he almost succeeded. Yuba swayed desperately aside from the giant's clutching fingers. Once he had seen a brown grizzly of these Sierras crush the life from a man, and the horrible picture floated before his eyes now. Jones, he realized, was strong enough to do the same thing in a clinch.

The miner wheeled and lunged toward him again. This time Yuba did not wait for him. Like a bronzed arrow he closed the distance between them, and all the weight of a hundred and ninety pounds was behind the left fist he buried almost wrist deep in the giant's middle. Jones humped forward. Yuba swung his right straight to the giant's bearded chin. Jones' head snapped back, but one flailing paw-like hand smashed out with all the lightning of a mountain bear's thrust.

Yuba felt himself flung sidewise as though by an irresistible force. The power of that single blow set a thousand bells

ringing in his head. He felt his legs go out from under him as his boots struck slippery pine-needles.

Dimly he saw the miner rushing him again. The man was roaring out the words: "Here comes yore pay for the murders yore sneakin' countrymen have done. I hope the dead 'uns in hell are watchin' this!"

"Tromp him right into the ground!" one of the watching miners shrilled. "Mebbe it'll teach these damned Missourians tuh keep hombres like Rood Carper tuh home!"

Rood Carper! Through the roaring in his head, Yuba heard the name, and it stung him like the blow from a whip. Rood Carper! Grizzly Jim Jones was not the only man who had a score to settle with that Missourian!

The thought brought Yuba to his feet. His fists rapiered out, and the sound of their strike was like a cleaver slapping meat. The blows stopped Jones, and Yuba slid away from the miner's clutching hands.

The man's nose was red now, and his lips were puffy. He was breathing hard in the rarefied air. "Stand still and fight!" he yelled. "This ain't no runnin' match!"

And this time Yuba did. Lungs used to the thick atmosphere of the plains could not suck enough oxygen from this high air to keep him going. His arms felt leaden, but he taunted the giant nonetheless. "I got two punches left," Yuba said huskily. "Want 'em?"

"And more!" Jones roared. He came lunging in again, spitting blood. Yuba set himself to meet the rush, and he knew that he had told the truth. Two blows were about all he did have left. If they didn't stop the giant for good, Grizzly Jim Jones would trample the life from between his ribs.

He ducked a blow and buried his left in the miner's solar-plexus as they came together again. The fist hurt. Yuba heard Jones' gasp of agony. He stepped back as the other doubled forward, and brought up a sledging right to the miner's bearded chin. This time the giant's head did not snap back. He was falling too fast for that. Out before he touched the ground, Grizzly Jim crumpled in a heap at Yuba's feet.

Through the pound of blood in his ears, he heard his little, outspoken partner crowing.

"There's your overgrown Californy ox, boys," Abel Marshall yelped. "Stiffer'n a Missouri ham!"

Yuba wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. "Shut up, Abel," he snapped through battered lips. "There ain't a cuss livin' got any more respect for Grizzly Jim Jones than me! Hell, if he'd ever got his hands on me once, you'd be cartin' me back to the wagon in chunks!"

"Which we're danged glad to say ain't goin' to happen," one of Grizzly Jim's friends said heartily.

Another thrust a jug into Yuba's hands. "Try a horn of this, young feller," he invited.

And still a third was saying to Marshall, "Light and set a while, you squallin' old jay-bird. The pot's warmin' on the fire and we're likely to have some beans soon."

Yuba felt a sudden glow that eased the pain in his battered head and body. Instead of twelve enemies, they now had twelve friends!

GRIZZLY JIM JONES stirred and sat up. He eyed his lithe opponent. "Ain't nothin' wrong with a Missouri man who can fight like you," he remarked admiringly. "Boys, let's eat. Time for palaver after we fill our bellies!"

An hour later Grizzly Jim started talking. He spoke with his eyes moodily fixed on the bright pine-cone fire one of his companions had just stoked.

"A gent needs a full belly to stomach this tale, Crane," he remarked. "A tale nobody hates to tell wuss than me."

Yuba stirred on one elbow. His body ached and throbbed in a dozen places, but he forced himself to forget the pain. "Abel and me," he said, "and all the ninety-some folks in our party have heard of Rood Carper. He deserted a wagon west of the Platte. Left a man and two women alone. The Dakotas got Tom Brandon, but we drove them off in time to save the women. If you can tie that for treachery, Jones, go ahead!"

Grizzly Jim reared to his feet, and started to pace restlessly about the fire-lit circle. "I can tie it, and knot it," he

grunted, "but I can't prove it. We 'uns and a lot of others, though, done lost our use for Missouri men after what's been happenin' in these hills. There's a sight of placer claims and prospect holes scattered through the pine-tops, and a good many of 'em are open right now, because the fellers that staked 'em are dead!"

Yuba listened intently. He had risked his life to hear this story. "Go on," he said.

The giant miner needed no invitation. "Some of us were moseyin' around up near the Divide when Carper and his bunch rolled in," he went on. "They 'lowed as how they wanted to go to prospectin', and some of us old timers showed 'em a few things. There was fifty Missouri men in his party, and they split up. Why, dang it, between all of 'em they covered every diggin' in these parts like a blanket. And it warn't many days before things started to happen."

He paused and lit a stubby pipe with a glowing ember. When it was drawing properly, he continued. "Dead men," Grizzly Jim Jones rumbled. "We'd find 'em at their claims with lead in their guts, or a bashed head. An' dead men ain't in the habit of tellin' who snuck up on 'em. That's why we can't prove Carper and his Missourians done the trick. But we do know they got gold-dust about their duds in a hurry! And we also know *they didn't pan it!*"

"Where's Carper and his bunch now?" Yuba asked tightly.

"We don't know," Grizzly Jim growled. "They kited outa here in a hurry, I'll tell you that! So now you mebbe see why we ain't had much use for Missouri men."

Abel Marshall was the first to break the silence as he and Yuba headed back toward their caravan. Burnsides bristling like the whiskers on a terrier's face, he snapped out his conclusions.

"Ain't no question," he declared, "but what this Rood Carper and his crew are responsible for the wave of death and robbery that has hit these Sierra diggings. If we could read that devil's mind, we'd probably find out that's why he came to California with fifty toughs at his back. They're aimin' to get rich quick, and to hell with how they do it. And while they're about the job, boy, they're damning every Missouri outfit on the plains in the eyes of the people already here!"

"You're right," Yuba agreed gloomily. "Lord only knows what kind of reception we'll get in Placerville."

"That's what I'm coming to," Marshall snapped. "Jones has forewarned us, and forewarned is forearmed. I'm for trying to head off Carper before it's too late! The train can come on behind us. Sam Polk can roll our wagons down these slants as good as you or me. And we—"

"And we," Yuba cut the peppery editor short, "can ride up to Carper and his fifty tough soldiers and blow them right out of their saddles, I suppose? Nope, Abel, we can't do it, much as I'd like to."

"Then what are we going to do?" Marshall shouted. "Blast it, boy, we can't just set and suck our thumbs while that he-heller gets every white man in the Sacramento Valley ready to shoot a Missourian on sight!"

Yuba drew a deep breath, and his blunt, coppery-bronzed face, that showed the bumps and bruises Grizzly Jim's fist had put on it, fell into stubborn lines. "I told Celia the night we buried her dad that I'd settle with Rood Carper, and I will. But it won't be now, Abel. It can't. In the first place we don't know where Carper and his bunch headed when they left here. There's a dozen big camps along the American and Sacramento Rivers they might strike, and we can't chase from one to another looking for 'em. Nope, pard, our first chore is to get the wagons down these mountains. From Placerville we've got to make the drive to Sacramento for tools and supplies. Then it's head north for the Yuba. Don't forget the folks in our train have crossed half a continent to get a look at that poor man's land. After we settle them will be time enough to go looking for Carper."

Abel Marshall nodded reluctantly. "What you talk is good sense, boy. I just hope it works out the way you paint it."

Yuba gave his peppery partner a glance out of eyes that had turned chill as ice. "We'll make it work out!" he said quietly.

HANGTOWN, or Placerville, as the more substantial citizens had rechristened this first mother-lode metropolis, was waiting for the Settlement car-

avan. Yuba made the discovery as he led the way down Nugget Canyon toward the town.

There was the smell of new-risen dust in the air, and the fresh marks of calks in the hard red clay of the road. A watcher stationed here had sighted the Missouri caravan and was heading for Hangtown to report its coming.

A moment later, as a vista of lower canyon opened ahead of him, Yuba saw that his surmise had been correct. Trailing a banner of dust like a comet behind him was a horseman riding hell-for-leather toward the mother-lode town.

Abel Marshall came galloping from the train to Yuba's side. He was chuckling. "The women and kids are havin' a fine to-do about all the things they're going to buy in Placerville," he explained. "And some of the men are right set on layin' over here tonight so's they can try their hand at buckin' the tiger and lappin' a bit of Californy's brand of red-eye. Told the folks I'd talk it over with you. They figger that skeer we had about Rood Carper queering things for us Missourians has all blowed over by now."

"You think so?" Yuba gestured at the horseman ahead of them.

It was three days now since he'd battled Grizzly Jim Jones, and on returning to the wagon camp that night, he had called all the emigrants together. Without mincing words, Yuba had told them of the blood bath that had visited the Sierra peaks. He had warned them that trouble might lie ahead—trouble of a kind they had never expected. And now within three days the Settlement emigrants had forgotten his warning!

"Looks like some gent's in a hurry to spend his dust," Abel Marshall broke the Argonaut's train of thought, as he stared at the distant horseman.

"I hope you're right," Yuba answered grimly. "But I'm afraid you're wrong." He gestured at pipe dottle strewn beside the red roadway. "That hombre's been sitting here smoking for quite some time, which means he's been waiting for somebody."

"Who?"

"Us!" Yuba said succinctly.

Abel Marshall's burnsides quivered. "Us? Why'd he be doing that, boy?"

Yuba answered him with a little smile. "So Hangtown can prepare a fitten reception for our train, Abel. One that I'm afraid we ain't going to like!"

Some forty minutes later, Yuba led the long, travel-stained caravan right down Placerville's main street. There wasn't any other way they could go because the shacks and shanties of the town were banked solidly against the canyon walls on either side.

Watchful now as a hunting bobcat, he stepped his gray slowly along through the hock-deep dust of the street, and though he appeared to be looking straight ahead, his frosty eyes were sizing things up, testing the temper of the town.

It was worse, he found, than a man could rightly expect. Sullen-faced prospectors lined the boardwalks Hangtown boasted. Their red flannel shirts in the light of the westering sun were the hue of blood. Missouri blood they would like to spill!

IT needed only one spark to set this town aflame. The thought was barely through Yuba's mind when a ragged, barefoot urchin with a face that belonged on one of Hell's own imps, touched the spark to the powderkeg of Placerville's hate.

Yuba saw a leering, red-bearded miner urge his son into the street. A snarling grin that matched his father's twisted the boy's lips. He hurled a rock with deadly accuracy at the wide-eyed face of one of Sam Polk's youngsters. The Polk youth was peering through a hole cut in the canvas siding of their Conestoga. His sudden, shrill cry of pain was drowned in the devilish screech of the Hangtown boy. He fired another rock, this time at Sam himself, seated on the wagon's high box.

Yuba whirled the gray, reckless anger suddenly possessing him. He'd brought the Settlement train two thousand miles without mishap, and no Hangtown brat and his red-bearded father was going to halt them now. A cooler part of his mind told him at the same time that on many occasions attack was the best defense. He charged the gray toward the Hangtown imp.

A third rock was in the boy's hand now. He hurled it straight at the horseman bearing down on him. Yuba ducked

the missile. The boy turned to scuttle back to the protection of the crowd that had started to roar, but he was too late. Yuba was too fast for him.

Those who witnessed the scene saw a lank, hard-visaged rider in worn buckskins lean half out of his saddle and grab the skedaddling youth by the collar of his shirt.

Lifting him to the saddle-bows as though his weight were nothing, Yuba turned the gray and headed for the tail-gate of Sam Polk's wagon before the crowd could make a move to rescue the boy. With a heave he flung the squirming youth into the Conestoga, and grinned as he heard the joyful whoop of Polk's youngsters. That Hangtown imp would find Missouri boys could play his own game.

The grin disappeared as he whirled the gray back toward their tormentors. Guns had appeared in some hands, but each man seemed loath to fire the first shot.

Yuba rode straight to where the Hangtown imp's red-bearded father was yelling that his son had been kidnaped.

Like a cougar on the prowl, he swung down from the gray. On the balls of his feet, fists hanging loose at his sides, Yuba moved toward the miner.

"It won't hurt your son," he spoke deliberately loud so that the listening crowd could hear his words, "to swaller a dose of his own medicine. Let him find out that Missourians have got feelings the same as California men. We didn't come here to start trouble, not a one of us. All we're askin' is the chance to buy some beans and flour in your town, then we'll be sashayin' on. There ain't a man, woman, or kid in these wagons that's hankerin' for your gold or your land. All we want is the same chance the rest of you had, when you came to California. And by damn, we're goin' to get it!"

"Not around here you ain't, mister!" A frock-coated man who might well have been a preacher from his somber attire and the sober expression on his face had come forward. "You'll buy no bacon and beans in Hangtown. As far as we're concerned, you can eat the soles off your shoes if you git hungry. Missourians ain't welcome in Hangtown. Not after the sample that passed through here a week back!"

"THEY meant Rood Carper. No doubt about it," Abel Marshall said that night in a gloomy camp that was panicky for the first time since they had pulled out from Council Grove.

Yuba had circled the wagons four miles or more below Placerville, in an effort to put as much distance between themselves and the hostile town as possible. Now he sat with his back to a wheel at the edge of the light from their camp-fire. Supper had been a cupful of beans and a chunk of dried bread fried in bacon fat. The meals in other wagons had been as scanty.

Someone was approaching through the dark, but it did not interrupt the flow of his thoughts. He spoke them aloud. "I made my mistake by telling the folks when we neared the Divide that they could go ahead and eat hearty—that they could buy more grub in Hangtown. Now most of us are down to our last handful of flour."

"You couldn't foresee this happening!" The person who had come up through the dark was Celia Brandon. She stood slim and straight, outlined against the dusky, star-shot blue of the sky, and Yuba felt an involuntary lift to his pulses. "You couldn't see this coming," the girl repeated in angry tones. "Dear Lord, nobody could! It—it's like following in the path of devastation left by a horde of locusts!"

Abel Marshall nodded his white head, and tugged fiercely at his burnsides. "A woman who can think up truck like that ought to make a good reporter," he said in his snappish voice. "You're hired, Celia Brandon, once I set up shop in Downieville!"

"Which is still a long way off," Yuba said grimly. He stared moodily into the coals and Celia Brandon, watching firelight paint his high cheekbones and the flat planes of his face, saw the fresh lines that had grown about his eyes. The responsibility of captaining the train, with this sudden added burden of trouble, had aged him beyond his years. And yet there was a stubborn, bull-dog jut to his chin that made the girl feel fiercely confident that all of them would live to see the poor man's paradise that had tolled them West.

"When locusts hit a country," Yuba

said, almost like a man talking to himself, "folks fight 'em *in front,* not behind. Now between here and Sacramento there ought to be enough gold to hold Carper up for a week. He's aimin' for bigger game, though. That's plain."

"You mean Sacramento itself?" Marshall asked. Both he and Celia Brandon had been listening intently to their sober-faced leader.

Yuba nodded. "Yes," he said quietly, "but this time we'll land the first lick."

"Now you're singin' my tune, boy!" Abel Marshall leaped to his feet. He looked like a terrier ready to tackle a mastiff.

A dry smile touched Yuba's lips at sight of the other's enthusiasm. "Mebbe," he said, "I shouldn't have said 'we.' This is one trail I'm riding alone!"

MIDNIGHT was at hand when Yuba Crane reached Sacramento, but it might as well have been day.

Men tramped the streets as they had in '49 and '50. Unshaded lamps glared through curtainless windows, splashing the boardwalks like the yellow gold that had come from the gravel bars along the river. Tin-panny music rolled from the mouths of dance-halls up and down Front Street. Barkers hawked their wares, and touts extolled the joys and beauties of their chosen palaces of entertainment. Saloon doors were seldom still as eddying humanity swirled in and out of them. And down on the river-front garish flares lighted tall side-wheelers disgorging more men and women and freight to swell the population of Sacramento.

It was toward the river that Yuba rode. The sheriff's office, as he remembered, lay in that direction. He dismounted in front of the pine log structure housing the office and jail. Silent in his moccasins he mounted to the porch, and stepped through the open door. A sleepy turnkey nodded behind a spur-gouged desk. Yuba halted in front of the man.

"Your boss in?" he asked quietly.

The turnkey jerked back his head. He surveyed the tall, buckskinned man before him sourly. "Lord-a-mighty," he grunted, "yuh might make some kind of noise. What you aimin' to do, scare me to death?"

Valley dust, collecting in his stubble of beard, had turned Yuba's face gray. He grinned at the turnkey. "I aim to scare your boss half to death," he drawled, "when I see him. Who's sheriff now, and where is he? If I remember right you had a hot election on when I left these diggings eight months ago."

"Dade Shepherd is the boss now," the turnkey growled. "He's out prowlin' the town. Likely you'll meet up with him at the Silver Slipper. That's the hottest spot these days."

Yuba nodded his thanks. He turned to go, but the turnkey was fully aroused now. "Hold up a minute," he ordered as the Argonaut reached the door.

Yuba turned, one sandy eye-brow cocked inquiringly. "Yes?"

The turnkey was an ugly man. Unshaven stubble covered his long, narrow face and broken fangs of teeth showed in his mouth as he grinned. "Missouri man, ain't you?"

Yuba had one hand against the door-case. He felt his finger-nails bite suddenly into the wood. "Yes," he nodded. "I'm from there. Anything wrong with that?"

The turnkey's face looked guileless. "Oh, not a thing," he drawled. "Don't mind me. I been sneakin' a horn of Shepherd's Forty-rod, and I ain't myself tonight."

Yuba nodded slowly. Almost reluctantly he turned out to the porch. Danger seemed to be walking at his side as he stepped to the gray. Slowly he mounted and headed on down Front Street toward a garishly lighted false-front that advertised itself as the Silver Slipper. He was thinking as he rode of the turnkey's question. Did it mean, he wondered, that Rood Carper and his guerrillas had already visited Sacramento? Had the man soured this town on Missourians as he had the others?

"There's one good way to find out," Yuba muttered. He reined in before the waterfront saloon, and tethered his mount at a busy hitch-rail. On the ground again, and still sheltered by the gray's shoulder, Yuba loosened his big Navy Colt in its holster. That talk with the turnkey had made him nervous.

Ducking under the peeled-pole rail, he

shouldered through the crowd that tramped the boardwalks. No one paid him any particular attention, though buckskinned men were not a common sight any more.

Yuba pushed through the Silver Slipper's doors and light hit him. He blinked to accustom his eyes to the brightness.

The saloon had gained its name from a woman's dainty slipper that hung in a place of honor above the glittering back-bar mirror. All the long shelves on either side of the big glass were stacked with imported liquors. The long mahogany bar itself had come 'round the Horn by clipper ship. Four aprons were busy behind it, serving the customers rotgut for two-bits, or good liquor for a dollar a throw. Short-skirted girls whirled in the arms of miners on the dance floor that filled the center of the room. Banking the floor on all four sides were gambling tables. Chuck-a-luck, roulette, faro. They had a game, the Silver Slipper boasted, to suit every man's taste and purse.

Yuba paused there just inside the entrance letting the crowd ebb and flow about him. Eyes, he became aware, were suddenly starting to focus on him, but he laid it to his buckskins. He was the only man in the saloon wearing them.

A space opened at the crowded bar as a group finished their drinks and headed back for one of the poker lay-outs, and as they left, Yuba caught sight of a heavy-set man who had been standing beyond them. He was wearing conventional black, and as his long coat swayed open, Yuba saw a five-pointed gold star catch the light from a crystal candelabra overhead. Unquestionably the heavy-set man was Sacramento's new sheriff, Dade Shepherd.

Yuba started to elbow a way toward the lawman. Shepherd, he was pleased to see, looked like a decent sort. A black, ram-horn mustache coasted wide on either side of his full, firm lips, and his black eyes above the mustache surveyed the Argonaut levelly as Yuba halted in front of him.

"Mr. Shepherd?"

The lawman nodded. "That's me, yes," he said in a low, courteous tone.

"My name is Crane," Yuba began.

Shepherd's cool eyes studied the lanky, buckskinned figure before him. He noted the trail-dust that powdered Yuba's shirt and trousers. "Looks like you've come a long way overland," he said pleasantly.

"I have," Yuba said. "Twice." He hastened to explain the ambiguous statement. "First time I saw the elephant was in '49 along with a lot of other folks. Made a strike north at Downieville and put the gold into land along the Yuba. Eight months ago I went home to take a bride. She—she'd died while I was on the way, but her father and about ninety other farmers were hankering to come to California, to take up land along the Yuba. Forty wagons are circled this side of Placerville right now."

"From where, did you say?" the sheriff's lips seemed barely to move beneath his black mustache.

Yuba felt his throat tightening. "Settlement, Missouri," he answered.

"MISSOURI!" A big miner, drunk on Silver Slipper red-eye, had overheard that word as he pushed past the sheriff and Yuba to reach the bar. "Missouri!" the man whirled, and Yuba saw the ugly, scabby line of a fresh knife scar along one cheek. The scar, though, was no uglier than his hot eyes. *"Missouri!"* he cried the word a third time, and it sounded more like the yowl of a cougar slapped by a grizzly.

"Boys," the man ranted, swinging to face the room, "here's one of 'em come back. One of that dirty bunch of Missouri skunks that sliced me up tuh make me show 'em where I'd hid my poke. This 'un ain't Rood Carper hisself, but by the Great Horn Spoon he'll do 'til better comes along!"

"Had a notion myself that I smelt skunk the minute buckskin pants come through the door," another man farther down the room came back promptly.

"I'd like to shake *my* dust out of him!" a third yelled savagely.

The comments sweeping the Silver Slipper were like the rush of a grassfire with a heavy wind behind it. There was no use trying to talk sense into this crowd. Many a man here, Yuba realized, had already fallen victim to Rood Carper and his guerrillas. And now this knife-scarred miner had branded him with the Carper stamp!

Across thirty feet of floor in front of him were the swinging doors of the

saloon. To his right was the bar itself, and behind him a rear door led out the back. It was the closest exit. The only way that he might stand a chance of getting out of the Silver Slipper.

The decision was hardly through his mind when the scarred miner opened the ball. Yuba stifled a curse and ducked a flailing round-house blow. He rammed a short right to the miner's middle, and the man sprawled backward on unsteady legs. His waving arms swept along the bar, and glasses and bottles fell with a loud clatter.

A steady roar of sound was rising in the Silver Slipper. It rolled like surf on a rocky coast. Yuba started to whirl and his eye caught a picture in the back-bar mirror. The vision of a stocky mustached man flicking a long Dragoon Colt from a holster beneath his coat. The gun was swinging high now, lamplight glinting on its bronzed plates. Yuba caught a glimpse of his own blunt, desperate face and then that Colt was sweeping down in a wicked arc toward the low crown of his wide-brimmed hat. He tried to duck, but it was useless. All the starch seemed to have run from his muscles. It was a pretty bitter pill to swallow—this realization that even the law hated Missouri men!

In the mirror Yuba saw that Dragoon barrel crease the crown of his hat, and for a moment he felt nothing. It was like looking at a stranger getting gun-whipped. Then his own face in the mirror was washed out by a curtain of sudden blackness. Yuba felt his knees turning to rubber. He caught at the rim of the bar with fingers that had lost their force, and then the acid flavor of saw-dust sprinkled on the floor was against his lips.

Through the waves of pain that was filling his head now, Yuba heard words that surprised him. Clear, cold words that were as brittle as chips of ice chopped from a block.

"Step back, all of you," Sheriff Dade Shepherd was standing a-straddle of the man he had felled, a gun in each hand now. "This hombre is going to jail—not Gallows Hill!"

A hand shaking his shoulder woke Yuba, but for a minute he lay with his eyes shut trying to remember what had happened. Then it came back to him—a miner horribly scarred by Rood Carper's knife had branded him one of that guerrilla band.

"He's a-comin' out of it, boss," the voice was the nasal drawl of the snaggle-toothed turnkey. "I can feel him wigglin' under my hands even if he ain't got his blinkers wide yet."

Yuba pried his eyes open. For a second the face of the turnkey and that of Sheriff Dade Shepherd mingled, and then he was able to separate them. His exploring fingers told him that he was on a rude bunk, and behind the sheriff's head he could see iron bars.

"So you got me to jail," Yuba said. His tongue felt thick, as though it were covered with flour paste.

The sheriff nodded. His face was unsmiling. "I got you here all right," he admitted, "but I hate to say that I don't know how long I'm going to keep you! Don't get me wrong now," he added grimly, "me'n Sleepy will do all we can to hold you. Howsomever, you might as well know the truth. The hot-heads down at the Slipper are organizing a neck-tie party. It's been quite some little time since the boys had a hanging bee!"

YUBA drew a deep breath. It seemed to help ease the pain in his head. He rolled his feet from the cot and sat up. "So I'm their candidate?" he said thickly.

"Looks like," the turnkey nodded.

The sheriff had more to say. "That cuss, Red Flandon, who branded you as one of the bunch that raided his claim, was drunk. Mebbe you're not one of Rood Carper's cutthroats—then again mebbe you are. Howsomever, it don't matter. I cracked you over the noggin because I knew damned well that was the only way to save you for the law. In a free-for-all, they'd have torn you into little pieces. But even drunks ain't goin' to tackle a man who is already on the floor. A couple of them even volunteered to carry you here to jail. I hoped that would be the end of it, but from the reports comin' in to me it won't be. Folks are pretty steamed up against you Missourians. This Carper and his bunch have given every Missouri man a bad name. They've been raising holy hell from the Sierras to here. I've had reports by the

dozen of prospectors robbed and murdered. Red Flandon is one of the few who've escaped death. That's why his testimony against you will be important. If he knows what he's talking about, mister, you'll hang!"

Yuba heard the sheriff's summary and bitterness filled him. "I can name you ninety people who'll give you the same story I told in the Silver Slipper," he said flatly. "There's no call, as I see it, to tar every Missourian with the same brush just because Carper is a skunk."

"You're right," the lawman admitted, "but try and make the public see that. Sacramento is closed to Missourians. Ain't a merchant here who'd sell you duck feathers!"

A faint sound that was swelling louder by the minute came through the thick walls of the jail. Yuba watched the sheriff step to the small barred window looking out on the street. He gained his own feet, and made his way to the lawman's side.

Through the window he could see a surging, dark mass of men moving up Front Street. Torches carried by some of the leaders lighted the procession. There were two or three hundred in the bunch, and more were joining all the time.

Yuba felt the turnkey's hot breath on his neck. "Blast 'em," Sleepy muttered. "They'll tear this jail to smithereens, and if we ain't keerful, boss, they'll take us right along with this prisoner."

"They'll *have* to take me to get at him!" Yuba heard the sheriff mutter. "Law's law!"

As they watched through the barred window a sudden commotion struck the crowd. Fourteen horsemen came swinging into view from between two pine-board shacks behind the lynch mob. At a run they put their mounts straight up Front Street, and hang-crazy men were forced to open a lane for them or get trampled on the spot.

Yuba felt himself tense as he watched the surprise scene. The horsemen were riding by threes, and the trio in the lead caught and held his attention.

The riders on either side of the galloping leader were smaller figures. Familiar! The man in the center of the trio was also familiar. He was huge, a giant atop a big black horse. Yuba recognized the horse first. It was the one he had seen Grizzly Jim Jones riding when they had first met in the Sierras and now he realized the brown-bearded miner was in the animal's saddle. That diminutive pair on either side of him could be Abel Marshall, and Celia Brandon, wearing man's garb!

Yes, that was who they were! Torchlight in the hands of those scattering to get out of their hard-riding way lighted the lead trio for a moment.

At the sight Yuba knew what he must do. Grizzly Jim Jones and his party were making their bid to rescue him before the mob tore the jail down, log by log. If they were willing to risk their lives for him he had to do all he could to help them.

The stocky sheriff had his face pressed to the bars watching the riders scatter the hang-mob. He seemed to have forgotten that his big guns were in their holsters beneath his coat.

Yuba reached forward on either side of Shepherd. His hands swept the lawman's coat wide, and then his palms were closing on the cool, wooden butts of the lawman's weapons. He had them from leather before Dade Shepherd knew what was happening.

However, he was no quicker than the turnkey. As he got the guns clear of the sheriff's box coat, Yuba felt the muzzle of a Colt bore into his back.

"Feller," the turnkey said, "I ain't near as sleepy nor dumb as I look. Drop the hoglaigs afore I split you wide open!"

Yuba's thumbs had found the chill knurled steel of the hammers. His answer was to ear them back, the clicks sounding loud in the musty cell. There were times in the past when he had played his share of poker, and always he had found that his bluff worked as good as the next man's.

"Go ahead and shoot," he invited. "Just happens that my fingers are on the triggers of these smoke wagons, and even if you shoot me there'll still be enough life left to pull 'em. Now you figure out which you want most. Me, dead. Or your sheriff, alive!"

YUBA heard a long breath sigh from the turnkey. Those horsemen out in Front Street were close enough now for the hoofs of their mounts to rouse echoes

from the buildings on either side. Time was shortening fast.

"Name your answer, Sleepy," Yuba invited again.

"You win," the turnkey admitted. "Dade's worth a dozen of you damned Missouri skunks!"

Yuba heard the fall of the turnkey's own Colt to the puncheon floor. He prodded the sheriff around to face his employee, and then sidestepped away from both of them. He noted that the door to the cell had been left ajar. A big ring of keys was hanging at Sleepy's belt.

"Toss 'em into the hall," Yuba waved the muzzle of one Colt at the keys. "I'll follow them out and shut the door. Some of your Sacramento friends will free you soon enough. As for your guns, Sheriff," the Argonaut added as the turnkey fumbled at his belt, "I'll send 'em back to you from the Yuba. I've never stole a thing in my life, and I ain't hankerin' to start now. Neither have I ever bucked the law before, but when it turns blind there ain't much else a gent can do."

Sheriff Dade Shepherd had faced death before, and he knew that he was facing it now at the hands of the bleak-visaged stranger who held his own guns. A man who knew when he was licked, the sheriff shrugged.

"You've got mighty fine friends," he said dryly. "Seems like the only hombre who'd have so many hard-riding jiggers to back his play would be a Rood Carper man. Sorry, Crane, that's the way I see it, but if you want me to believe different, you'll have to prove it!"

Yuba drew a deep breath and followed the keys Sleepy tossed into the hall. He clanged the barred door behind him. The sheriff's words had hit him hard, but he could see the logic of the lawman's view. Dade Shepherd didn't know that he had gained a firm friend by whipping the first man who had branded him with the guerrilla stamp. And now there was no time to explain. Hoofs were thundering up outside the jail. A gun-shot broke above the roar of the mob as miners in the hang-crazy ranks realized that the riders had come to cheat them of their quarry.

Yuba lingered only an instant longer in the hall that ran between double banks of cells. His gray eyes were chill as the bars on either side of him as he looked at the sheriff.

"I'll try and make you believe different," he said softly. "I'll try and show everybody that *some* Missouri men are just as good as you *Californios!*"

THE front door of the jail crashed in as Yuba raced to Shepherd's office. Grizzly Jim Jones was in the lead, a shining ax clutched in one hand.

"Whoops!" he yelled as his eyes fell on Yuba's disheveled, blood-stained shape. "Looks like I won't need my can-opener after all!"

Abel Marshall was right behind the giant miner, his peewee gun, the hide-out derringer, in one hand. Burnsides bristling like a terrier's whiskers, his shrill cry of pleasure echoed Jones' deep-throated roar.

Peering across the *Clarion* editor's shoulder was another face. Celia Brandon, dressed in a man's shirt, and a pair of Marshall's pants. Her eyes were blazing.

"We followed you!" she exclaimed, "And luck was with us. We came on Grizzly Jim and his men just outside of town. I knew you'd run into trouble—"

"Women," Abel Marshall snapped, "are always gabbin'. Come on, boy. We even picked up a nag for you. Mebbe we kinda borryed it, but you can't be picky and choosey when you're runnin' away from a hangnoose!"

Yuba hurried outside with them. Lead thudded into the lintel above his head as more men in the forefront of the hangnoose mob opened fire.

"She's gettin' hot!" Grizzly Jim Jones laughed. "Come on, let's ride, afore we have to brush off a few of them shypokes."

Yuba felt the miner's huge hands helping him into the saddle atop a clean-limbed roan they had taken from one of the hitch-rails along the street. He glanced over his shoulder at the red flashes of gun-flame gouging the night, and then swung back to catch the saddle's horn, for dizziness had swept over him. That sheriff had hit hard. It was going to take every ounce of guts he possessed to stay in the roan's saddle.

With Grizzly Jim leading the way they sped along Front Street. The mob behind

were trying to find mounts for the chase, but it wasn't long until they were in a confused tangle, bickering as to who should have the honor of mounting a given horse.

Laughter rumbled deep in the giant miner's chest as they reached the outskirts of Sacramento. He looked at Yuba and a grin made his white teeth flash in their frame of dark beard.

"Ain't had so much fun in a dog's age," he rumbled, "and I'll wager the same holds for the boys. Too danged bad we ain't got a snort of red-eye to celebrate!"

The night air had cleared Yuba's head. He looked levelly at the miner. "None of us," he said quietly, "have got anything to be celebrating. I'm sorry as hell for the sake of you and your boys, but you're marked as bad as any Missourian now. Those hombres coming for me had torches, and they saw your faces when you rode through them. Sacramento's not safe for you, from now on. No safer than for us. Grizzly," he added after waiting a moment for his words to sink in, "you and your boys are going to wear the same brand of Cain we do—until we meet up with Rood Carper and finish him!"

Grizzly Jim nodded reluctantly. "We rid in with these folks," he gestured at the white-haired editor and Celia Brandon, "because I couldn't see them Sacramento slickers make trouble for a good man. Howsomever, I cain't say as I figgered we'd end with the Missouri label. Boys," he spoke to the group of miners who had gathered in a close circle about the foursome, "what do ye make of it?"

"Crane's right," one admitted reluctantly. "Looks like we're all tarred with the same brush. We've got to stick together, until we cool the heels of that cuss, Carper!"

DAWN was in the sky when they sighted the tattered tilts of the Settlement train.

Sam Polk had already got the wagons strung out. They were moving slowly down the notch of the canyon below Placerville—a travel-weary outfit.

At sight of them Polk came galloping forward. Worried lines mapped his homely, simple face. He shook hands with the returned Argonaut.

"Sure glad to see you back," he said in heartfelt tones. "Danged if empty bellies don't make folks feel the queerest way. Some figgered you'd run out on 'em. Others are claimin' this was a wild goose chase from the beginnin'. And some are for cuttin' out of the train, and squattin' on the handiest land. Only thing that holds 'em with us is lack of grub. Ain't a single one knows where his next meal is coming from!"

Yuba nodded. "I know." His face turned bleak. "We're in a land of plenty, and starving—because we're from Missouri. I've been trying to figure an answer to our next meal, and I think I've got it. About ten miles north of here lives a true *Californio*. One of the old *hacendados,* Don Jaime Perez. I gave him a little help in '49 when a couple of road agents tried to take his purse. Haven't seen him but twice since, but those oldsters don't forget favors. He's the one man in California who might give a Cain-branded train a hand!"

There was something almost like tears in Celia Brandon's dark eyes as she murmured, "God grant he will—"

Yuba's hunch and Celia's prayer was answered. Don Jaime Perez loaded their Conestogas with freshly slaughtered beef, and flour from his own mill. His *mozos* brought baskets of fresh vegetables—something the Missouri men and women hadn't tasted in two thousand miles.

But to all of this bounty he added a warning.

"Perhaps," the tall, courtly don told Yuba the next morning as the train was ready to roll again, "this will be the last time I can give help to my friends. Once all that I could see from the top of a high hill was mine. Now I have little left. Land thieves are squatting on my lands. They have defied my vaqueros to oust them. And when I have protested to the sheriff in Sacramento, and to the courts of the same city, I have received always the same answer, 'Show us the title to that land you claim.'

"Por dios! For three hundred years my family have lived on these leagues. Is that not enough to prove the land mine? Deed we once had, grants from the King of Spain, and Viceroy of Mexico. But they have long since been misplaced and lost. *No teniente,* I can prove nothing to

satisfy the courts, and so you see me, a man with little where once I had much.

"It is the sign of the times, *Señor* Crane. Watch for it yourself when you reach your Rancho Rosita, and if you face the same danger do not rely on the courts to settle the trouble."

It was a lighter-hearted train that moved on into the north from Rancho Cacique. The miners they met and the farmers who had filed on their quarter sections of free valley land received them pleasantly.

"Carper and his bunch musta headed for San Francisco when they got chased out of Sacramento," Grizzly Jim Jones gave as his opinion. "We wouldn't be meetin' smiles if they'd come this way."

Yuba was forced to agree with the miner as ten days brought them almost within striking distance of the Yuba River. "I guess you're right at that," he admitted, "and nobody is happier about it than me. Our first chore from the beginning was to get these folks settled along the Yuba. After that we'll see about Carper."

In his own heart Crane was finding a new happiness too, as the days narrowed the distance between them and the thousand-acre ranch he had purchased with Yuba River gold. He had named his place in true California style, Rancho Rosita, "Ranch of the Rose." He had called it that because Natalie Marshall had loved roses, and he had visioned more than once, as he watched native workmen put the finishing touches on a rambling adobe hacienda, how Natalie would make the courtyard and patio bloom. He caught himself wondering now if his loved one who had died would resent seeing another make those same roses bloom in the Yuba basin's rich black soil.

ANOTHER day and another passed, and with the ending of the third, Yuba halted his roan trail-horse on a rise, and saw the end of their journey ahead. But his heart was too full to say much as Abel Marshall, Grizzly Jim Jones, and Celia Brandon came riding from the wagons to his side.

Without looking at them, he gestured at what lay directly ahead. "Poor man's land," he told them quietly.

Sunset painted the Yuba a molten red. It brought pastel shadows to fill the oak-studded hollows of the wide, rich land. Peace, such as travel-weary emigrants had not known for two thousand miles seemed to fill the air.

Abel Marshall breathed deep. "And we can file on this," he said in low, devout tones. "Boy, you've brought us to a little chunk of paradise!"

Grizzly Jim Jones, leaning on the nub of his saddle, growled deep in his chest. "Might be paradise if there warn't no varmints around. Take a look-see at what has jest rid from the river."

Yuba had noticed the men too and for the third time since he'd crossed the Sierras he felt a cold wind of premonition against his spine. There were six in the group who had just come from the trees banding the stream. He watched them quirt their mounts up the long slope toward them, and then he looked at Celia Brandon.

"Ride back to the wagons and tell them to wait up until we see what these gents want," he said tersely.

The girl's heart was in her eyes as she peered at the tall, young scout. "Yuba," her words came in a whisper, "don't let anything stop us now."

Yuba knew what the girl was thinking. His face was flinty when he answered her. "I won't," he said quietly.

When he swung front again, the riders were close enough to make out details of their appearance. All of them were roughly garbed in nondescript clothes and short boots with the legs of their pants tucked carelessly into them. The fading light of sunset caught at the rifles they carried across their saddle bows, and glinted against the pair of Colt revolvers each man had strapped to his waist.

"They ain't Forty-Niners, I can tell you that by the look of 'em," Grizzly Jim growled.

Yuba had no time to make a reply for the sextet were pulling their mounts to a rearing halt in front of the three caravan men. All of the newcomers were hard-eyed, heavily bearded. Along with that they carried another stamp that branded them—a certain animal-like tenseness. There was about them the cruel, slinking ferocity of wolves following a herd of antelope.

The spokesman for the group was

shorter than the rest, but he was as broad through the shoulders as a bull buffalo, and his manner had all of a bull buffalo's arrogance.

He singled out Yuba as a target for his questions. "You the boss of that outfit comin' up the hill?" he demanded.

Yuba nodded. He could feel every muscle in his body tensing. "You've called it," he agreed flatly. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Nothin' except squatters ain't welcome along this stretch of river. All this here territory has been taken over by Rancho Rosita!"

If the broad-chested leader of the sextet had exploded a black powder bomb under Yuba's trail-horse the shock of the man's words could have hit the Argonaut no harder.

"Rancho Rosita," Yuba said through lips that were suddenly dry, "belongs to me."

"The hell you say!" The leader was sneering now. "It belongs to Rood Carper, and we're just the dudes to make that stick!"

Incredibly fast, the rifle cradled across the bows of the man's saddle swung into line, but fast as he moved, Yuba was quicker. Moccasined heels kicking deep into the flanks of his mount, he sent the big animal lunging forward. His horse collided with the stocky man's dun as the leader's rifle exploded. Yuba felt lead pluck at the wide brim of his hat, but he was past caring.

Rancho Rosita in Rood Carper's hands! They had thought the guerrilla had headed for San Francisco after slipping out of Sacramento. Now he could see what the man had done. With fox-like cleverness, Carper had quit his raiding and he and all of his men had come north. Here they could settle as squatters on choice bottomlands, and unless they abused the privilege too flagrantly the Downieville law would let them stay.

Yuba had snatched one of Sheriff's Dade Shepherd's Colts from the band of his buckskin trousers as he lunged forward. The bearded leader had dropped his rifle after that single ineffective shot, and was clawing a revolver from the holster at his right hip. Yuba slashed sidewise with the long barrel of his own revolver, felt the shock run clear to his elbow as steel connected with the other's skull.

The man wobbled sidewise in his saddle. Like a sack with the grain half gone from it he toppled from his dun. Other guns were talking about Yuba now. He heard the sharp bark of Abel Marshall's derringer, and saw a rider clap a hand to a suddenly bloody shoulder. Then out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the *Clarion* editor knocked from his saddle by the force of a heavy slug. He triggered through the dust that their mounts were kicking up and saw his lead even the score.

Grizzly Jim Jones was chanting as he swapped lead with another guerrilla pair. "Come on, you Missouri crackers. You ain't got the guts to whip an honest *Californio!*"

Three of the sextet were on the ground as the dust and gunsmoke cleared. Two of the others had dropped their weapons and were hunched in their saddles with upraised arms. Only one had turned tail and fled.

Grizzly Jim Jones noticed the fleeing rider. "I'll stop that bucko before he reaches the river," he prophesied. One of the giant's arms hung limp at his side. He was reeling in his saddle and blood had turned half of his red shirt black.

YUBA caught the miner's good arm. His eyes were still as cold as the gray bullets that had started and ended this fight. "Let the cuss go, Grizzly," he said. "I want him to carry back word of this fight."

"You want him to?" Jones seemed to feel the effects of his wounds no more than a real grizzly. "Why, for hell's sake? It'll bring Rood Carper and the rest of his bunch py-rootin' out here with their weapons primed for b'ar."

"It won't," Yuba said calmly, "because we're going to beat them to the punch. I've seen outfits like Carper's before, and I've watched them break up like chaff in the wind once their king-pin isn't on hand to lead them."

"And what's goin' to keep him from leadin' 'em?" Grizzly Jim demanded truculently.

"I am," Yuba said. "And you're going to follow me with your bunch and about

half the emigrant men in the caravan."

"It'll surprise 'em, all right," Grizzly Jim agreed doubtfully. "They ain't used to seein' plow-share greenhorns take the lead in a gun-ruckus. However, I'm agin you headin' us in there. You ain't got a mother's chance of snakin' Carper out from under the noses of forty gun-totin' skunks. It'd sure soften 'em up, though," he ended wistfully, "if you could swing it."

Yuba shrugged. "I can try," he said simply. "Give me two hours lead."

Before he left them, Yuba saw their prisoners and the wounded back to the train. He was somewhat worried about his little partner, but he quit worrying when Marshall snapped irascibly at Celia Brandon as she cleansed his shoulder wound with hot water and alcohol.

"Everything happens to me," he snarled. "Now I got to set here and suck my thumb while good men ride to settle the score with Carper. Yuba," he glanced at the buckskinned scout, "don't you care what shape that ranch of yours will be in after the fracas. I got a good notion I can name you someone who'll make it spick and span again."

Words trembled suddenly on Yuba's lips as he watched Celia blush, but he forced them back. Now was no time for him to talk. Death would be riding at his shoulder from the moment he left this camp.

Leaving his horse in the bosque of the river an hour later, Yuba slipped on foot to the out-buildings surrounding Rancho Rosita.

Before pulling out, he had told Celia and Grizzly Jim about José Sandoval and his wife, Panchita. "They're a couple of native *Californios* I hired to take charge of the ranch while I was on my way east. They love the place like it was their own, and unless José got too brave when Carper came, I imagine he's still alive. I'm hoping he is, because I'm counting on him being able to get me into the big house where Carper is probably holed up."

Through the early dark now, he stole to the side of the whitewashed adobe cabin his workmen had built for Sandoval and his wife. He scratched cautiously on one oil-paper window.

As though she had been waiting for

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some such signal as this, Yuba heard a door close and almost instantly he caught the flash of white petticoats as Panchita came around a corner of the small house.

"Mi patrone," the woman cried softly. *"Madre de dios,* how I have prayed for your safe return!"

"Prayed?" Yuba murmured. They were standing in the deep shadow cast by an oak that arched almost completely over the small *casa,* and unless guerrilla guards were close at hand no one would be able to see or hear them.

"Si, si," Panchita bobbed her head. "Thees *cabron,* thees Rood Carper, they have make me cook for all hees crew, and both José and I have been force at gun-point to wait on them like they are babies still in a cradle! José, they have kept with them, but at sunset each night, thees Carper has sent me here to my *casa* to sleep through the dark hours. And each night I have lie awake and pray for your coming."

"Let's hope I can answer your prayers," Yuba said grimly. "There will be more men here soon to help me," he added, "but first I must try and capture this Carper."

"Pobrecito!" Panchita said emphatically. "It cannot be done, *señor.* There are two score guns about the *gringo cabron."*

"One man, Panchita," Yuba explained patiently, "can sometimes do more than a dozen. If I fail, many men who have traveled two thousand miles seeking homes may die. I had hoped for José's help to get me inside my *casa—"*

Panchita's face was a dim, brown blur in the dark. She spoke the thoughts that were coming into her mind. "One of thees Carper's *cabrones,"* she said slowly, "has returned since I feed the men their night meal. Perhaps now eef someone wearing one of my *rebozos* and a dress should walk to the kitchen he could enter—"

Yuba gripped Panchita's arm until she winced. "Just don't hand me a petticoat!" he said dryly.

WITH the unfamiliar feel of a dress sweeping about his instep, Yuba walked a few minutes later toward the hacienda. He kept his shawl-covered head bowed in the humble fashion of *Californio* natives as he approached the kitchen door. The feel of Sheriff Dade Shepherd's twin Colts in his hands was comforting. The long Dragoons were hidden beneath the folds of the *rebozo* that draped his shoulders and arms.

So far everything had been remarkably easy. No one had challenged him. No one seemed to be paying the slightest attention to Rancho Rosita's yard. And suddenly Yuba learned why.

He was almost to the doorway that led into the kitchen when it was yanked open in front of him. A man stumbled half through the opening then clutched at the door frame and steadied himself.

"What the hell you doing here, Panchita?" he snarled down at the figure below him. "Get back to your crib where you belong."

Yuba answered the man in soft, halting English. "I come to make the dinner for the men who were not here when the rest of you ate."

"Blast your Mex hide," the man growled, "you know damned well that only one came back, and he's so busy likkering up with Rood and the rest of the boys that he ain't interested in frijoles. Now get on back to your crib like I told you or I'll gun-whip the juice right out of your brown skin. Git, I say—"

Yuba had been moving steadily forward while the other talked. Now, from beneath the rim of the *rebozo* he saw a gun sweep into the guerrilla's hand. The man was mean-drunk with whiskey. There was no telling what he might do. On the thought, Yuba moved fast, one of his own weapons slithering from beneath the folds of his shawl. He slashed out with the gun and steel grated against steel as the barrel of his weapon smashed the Colt from the other's fingers. He swung again, and heard the sodden thud of metal cracking against bone. Yuba eased the man to the foot of the steps.

There was no time to waste now, he realized. This guerrilla, whatever his name, had stepped out back here to get a breath of air. If he didn't rejoin the party in the *hacienda's* main *sala* others would be coming to see what had happened to him.

With the skirt tugging at his knees and taking the elasticity out of his walk, Yuba stepped into the lighted kitchen and blinked

to accustom his eyes. For a moment, though, it was his ears that told him what was happening here. Through an open door across the room came the loud babble of drunken voices. It told him why the yard about the *rancho* was empty. When the rider they had allowed to escape returned with word of the battle, Rood Carper had started popping corks. A crew of his kind needed whiskey courage to do their killing.

As his eyes adjusted themselves to the light, Yuba moved to the doorway through which the roars of drunken talk was coming. He pressed against the wall of a short hall that opened into the *hacienda's* big *sala*.

When the *casa* had been built Crane had visioned gracious dancers as sometime filling the long living room. Women in shimmering silk and satin, with none more beautiful than Natalie Marshall. But Natalie was gone now and the *sala* was a shell of what he had imagined it would be. Through the opening ahead of him, Yuba could see tapestries and drapes defiled by tobacco juice. Spilled liquor had discolored the white walls. Broken glass had been ground into the polished floor by careless boots. Tobacco burns, and the trailing gouges of spurs scarred the long, Spanish oak table that stood in the center of the room.

Yuba's eyes were hot as he surveyed the devastation. Men were sprawled all about the room, on rugs, on couches, on fragile chairs. Seated at the head of the table, with a bottle on either side of his outflung arms, was Rood Carper.

Yuba recognized the man from the description Grizzly Jim Jones had given him. Red hair flaming, a snarling smile on his down-curving lips, the Missourian who had caused them all so much trouble tipped a bottle to a glass in his fingers. But as though some sixth sense warned him that alien eyes were watching, he raised his head, and let the liquor spill unheeded over the table.

"Panchita!" he snapped, his gaze taking in Yuba. "What in the name of merry hell you doin' here? Get back to your crib!" he used the identical words of the man Yuba had felled.

It gave the Argonaut a sudden idea. He spoke with his head ducked and his knees flexed to minimize his height. "*Señor,*" he said in agitated tones, "I hear the cry awhile ago from out back, and I come to see who make it. I find one of your *amigos* lying at the bottom of the kitchen steps with blood on his head. Thees I come to tell you."

FOR the space of a dozen heartbeats, Yuba held his breath. This was the test. If Carper sent one of his men to view that unconscious shape at the rear steps his retreat would be cut off. If the guerrilla leader came himself, he had two guns to ram into the man's back.

A minute passed and he saw Carper open his mouth to order one of his band to do the investigating, then the guerrilla tossed down the whiskey in his glass instead and pushed back his chair.

"I'll bet that blasted Blackie Coombs fell down the steps and cracked his head," he snarled at the rest of his men. "Means the rest of you buckos have had enough of that cougar juice. Don't forget we've got a job to do tonight. That damned emigrant outfit has got to be wiped out—lock, stock, and barrel!"

He lurched to his feet and came tramping down one side of the long table. Yuba waited, and every muscle in his back was tight as wire. He remembered the tormented faces of Celia Brandon and her mother when he had first seen them, and his own visage grew as hard as one of Satan's own mates. If he could get Carper outside the guerrilla would never again see Rancho Rosita.

A gun muzzle prodded against Yuba's spine as that thought crossed his mind.

"If this cuss in the dress is Panchita," a thick voice said, "she packs an awful wallop!"

"Blackie!" The word sprang to Rood Carper's lips as he reached the hall.

And almost like an echo to prove the guerrilla's point came a long, crying wail from somewhere out front of the house.

"That's Panchita!" Rood Carper jerked the word from lips that were suddenly taut. "Boys," he snapped. "See what's goin' on. I'll handle this—"

Windows were crashing in before he finished the sentence, and a gun was hammering lead into the big lock on the front door. Yuba saw Grizzly Jim Jones come

charging through one broken window, careless of the glass that ribboned his shirt and flesh. He had a long Dragoon Colt in one hand and a yell on his lips.

"Come on, you Missouri wild-cats," he was crying. "Rattle your hocks!"

Carper was whirling back to rally his men. If he succeeded, the surprise of Grizzly Jim's coming would amount to nothing. Yuba flung himself forward in a long, low dive, away from the gun at his back. The weapon exploded, and he felt lead singe his hair as his fingers closed about one of Carper's ankles.

The man struck on his hands and knees, and whirled like a cornered cat. Yuba felt one arm go numb as lead from Blackie Coombs' gun burned through it. The guerrilla had missed a fatal shot twice. He wouldn't miss a third.

Yuba twisted and the Colt in his hand that was still usable sped lead and flame up at Coombs towering above him. He couldn't have missed if he had tried. The force of the slug seemed to blow Coombs backward, and then lead was hammering into him from the opposite. The very force of Carper's slugs whirled Yuba toward the guerrilla.

"Fall, damn you," the man was crying. "Fall! *You're shot to doll rags!*"

Yuba heard himself reply, and he hardly recognized his own voice. "I told a girl and her mother you deserted a long time ago that there was a particular corner in hell reserved for you. Mebbe we'll both end there, but you're going first!"

Then he was thumbing a gun as he never had before, driving slug after slug into Carper's lank body. Through a film of blood and gunsmoke before his eyes, he watched Rood Carper bend in the middle, and fall forward on his face. He seemed to be dropping himself, then, into some kind of void, and his only regret as he fell was that he had been unable to find the words to tell Celia Brandon that she had taken the place in his heart of a girl buried back in Settlement.

"LIKE a couple of sticks of cordwood, that's the way we found you." It was Grizzly Jim Jones talking. "Yep, you were layin' right on top of Carper, that blasted dress of Panchita's wropped around your neck, plumb unladylike. From the looks of the lead we found in you, none of us give yuh till morning. Leastways none of us men did. But them women, Panchita and Celia, they wouldn't agree. Feller, I'm tellin' you their faith and nursin' is what has pulled you through. Three weeks you've laid here, and one of them's been holdin' your hand nigh every minute."

Yuba had his eyes open, and for the first time in those long weeks his brain was clear. He grinned up at the bearded miner. "That's enough about me," he said weakly. "What about the rest of the folks?"

"Them guerrillas?" the giant acted like he wanted to spit, and then he remembered that he was inside Rancho Rosita. "Why, hell, them cusses didn't last long. Their kind never do against honest men. The ones that are still alive are waitin' trial in Downieville, and the rest are on their way to hell.

"Our own folks have been so busy filin' on land down the river, and laying homesites, that most of them remember all that's happened as kind of a bad dream. But there ain't a one of them that's forgot you. Fact is, all of 'em are jest champin' at the bit, waiting for you to get well so's they can give you a proper shindig."

"A shindig?" Yuba asked. His eyes found Celia Brandon who had just stepped into the room. The girl paused as though embarrassed, and color flooded her cheeks.

Abel Marshall, who was right behind her, chuckled. "Why shore, boy," he drawled. "A shindig, a shivaree. Case you don't know it you been layin' here and proposin' to Celie regular for the past three weeks. And every time you've opened your mouth she's said 'yes'!"

Downing had learned from an expert—Sam Bass, most notorious train robber in western history!

DESERT ALCATRAZ

A Frontier True Story

By GILBERT YEAGER

Yuma Prison—dread name to the lawless of the southwestern frontier! Here is the story of that hell-circled Rock in which was carved a hard and cheerless "home" for the outlaw breed.

A KNIFE pressed naggingly at the ribs of Superintendent Tom Gates. Shadows crept like long, gray fingers clutching Yuma's Prison Hill as the October sun broke over a jagged desert horizon.

"It would not be wise to struggle, amigo," came the silken accented purr

at Tom's shoulder. "You will tell the guards to open the gate pronto, eh?"

Tom recognized the convict as Puebla, a Mexican desperado. Other prisoners, all well armed with murderous blades, swarmed, dragging the official toward the only opening in those eighteen-foot-high walls. His gun was jerked from its holster and Gates caught the hard-eyed menace in the face of Barney Riggs, up for life on a murder count.

"You can't get away with it, men!" warned the superintendent. "You ain't the first that tried . . . and failed."

"We know what we're doin'," growled Riggs. "If you value that hide of yours, tell them guards to open up."

High overhead the 800-pound alarm bell suddenly boomed out over desert and Colorado River bottomlands summoning Indian trackers. The convicts milled at the gate. Tom saw the white-faced tower guards staring wide eyed, uncertain. Around his mouth formed grim, determined lines.

"Don't open that gate!" he ordered.

"The *superintendente* is a foolish man," hissed Puebla. "Open up quick or he dies!"

Realizing that the former *bandido* was one bad coyote who did not bluff, guards swung the barrier wide to save Tom Gates. The group of prisoners forged through with their hostage. But Arizona Territorial Prison was mustering for emergency action. Assistant Superintendent John H. Behan, former Tombstone sheriff in the Earp-Clanton days, rushed up half dressed to close the gate against a wholesale break and snapped orders at assembling guards who ranged along the wide walls, rifles ready. Ragged wasteland crags echoed and re-echoed the din of clapper against bronze shell as men sweated at the bell rope. The four-barreled Gatling gun swiveled to menace yard and cell blocks.

"We can't make it," a convict muttered nervously.

"They will not shoot," jeered Puebla. "It is too dangerous for *Superintendente* Gates."

Holding the official as a shield, they angled slowly toward the river. But Guard Hartlee, a crack rifleman, dropped to one knee and drew careful bead. His rifle thundered. A convict whirled and fell heavily. Calm as an executioner, Hartlee lined sights and squeezed trigger, picking off men until only the desperate Puebla, holding Gates, and Barney K. Riggs remained standing. Crazed with rage and frustration, Puebla tongued curses and threats. Hartlee's relentless gun muzzle rose again.

"So we all die!" bellowed Puebla. He thrust viciously, plunging his blade deep.

Tom Gates stiffened. Agony lines etched his face. The desperado lifted his crimson knife for a death stroke. But a blast of gunfire from an unexpected source halted the swing in mid-air. Screaming *"Madre mia!"* Puebla crumbled, blood streaming from the left side of his chest. No guard but life-termer Barney Riggs had suddenly turned on his fellow prisoner to save the life of Superintendent Gates.

And Yuma's "Rock" marked up another break that failed. That was in 1887 and for his action Barney Riggs received a full pardon. Whether this was fortunate or not for Riggs is questionable, since not long afterward he stopped some flying lead in a Texas saloon fracas.

MAN got together with Nature in 1876 to build an as near "escape proof" prison as was then known. Arizona's Alcatraz was carved from the solid granite of Prison Hill, surrounded on three sides by an undammed and turbulent Colorado River, a stream then being navigated by steamboats. To every compass point beyond river and Yuma's adobe shacks pushed a deadly circle of sand dunes and bone-strewn desert wastelands. Death, Thirst and Starvation rode tight herd with a wide loop awaiting the convict who managed to elude fierce Indian trackers, greedy for the $50 bounty paid them for each escaped man.

Planned to corral some of the West's most desperate rustlers, horse thieves, gunnies and train robbers, Prison Hill was an uncompromising school that taught a hard lesson. Famous pupils there were, too. Pretty gun-girl Pearl Hart, Three-Fingered Jack Laustenneau, Frank Leslie, most of the Alvord gang, and even an ex-disciple of Texas bad man Sam Bass. That recalcitrant prisoners

were not coddled, Three-Fingered Jack is a case in point.

Three-Fingers hailed from Chicago, coming to the Southwest with the purpose of master-minding a Mexican revolt. He did not wait to cross the border, however, to start the ball rolling. In the rip-roaring copper-mining town of Morenci, Arizona, Jack got a crowd of miners hopped up on talk and tequila until they staged a riot. But his plan to collect enough arms and followers to make his big play south of the border snagged when Arizona Rangers rode in. After a speedy trial Three-Fingers was sent to Yuma for a short term. But blood hot as the summer climate boiled through Jack's veins and less than a year passed before he led his first prison break.

W. M. Griffith, superintendent at the time, and a guard were making a routine inspection tour when Three-Fingered Jack and several other short termers jumped them with clubs. The two officials went down under a rain of blows. Their lives were saved and the break stymied only by the quick work of a trusty in the prison kitchen, W. F. Buck. Hearing the commotion, Buck ran out, saw what was happening and ducked back for some kind of weapon. The first thing he could lay his hands on was a butcher knife. Wielding this like a broad sword, he literally carved the fight out of Three-Fingers and pals. For this brave feat Trusty Buck received a full pardon and like all prisoners on release from Yuma, a suit of clothes, $5, and a railroad ticket good for 300 miles in any direction the rails ran.

And for his part Three-Fingered Jack had ten years added to a sentence which death cut short. Not long afterward Three-Fingers, being punished for another infraction of prison rules and still futilely raging at authority, died of a heart attack in the heat of high noon while locked in the "snake den," solitary confinement cell.

Territorial Prison had three cell blocks, the Dungeons, a block for "incorrigibles" or life-termers, and the main section for short-term prisoners. Life cells were square, windowless caves blasted from solid granite with an iron ring anchored in the floor to which inmates were sometimes chained. The main block, containing thirty-four cells, had steel reinforced masonry walls five feet thick. Each accommodated six prisoners with three steel bunks arranged in tiers on either side of a narrow aisle, men being chained to their bunks at night. In spite of this cramped state a Chinese prisoner committed suicide one night without his five cell mates knowing until they found his chained body next morning.

In the twenty-cell dungeon block, also cut from the granite hill, was the "snake den." Prisoners dubbed this fifteen-foot square by ten-foot high hole the "jungle," but no jungle was ever that dark, hot and dismal. When the double sheet-iron doors clanged shut behind a convict, he stood in total blackness. Windowless and with only a small hole drilled through tons of native stone ceiling for ventilation, little wonder that a few days in the "jungle" on a bread-and-water diet tamed the worst bad men or drove Jack Lausten-neau into the insane fury which caused his death. Yet, a convict named Martinez spent forty-four days in this foul den following an escape try.

The name "snake den" is said to have been applied after some worthy ladies visited the prison and watched trusties clean out the dungeon. When the vent screen was removed, a collection of scorpions and centipedes fell out, thus horrifying the visitors and sending them forth to spread a yarn that grew until popular belief had the place peopled with everything from sidewinders to gila monsters.

PRISON HILL maintained workshops, an electric plant, ventilation system, farm and even a library, where many inmates received their first "book larnin'." Once the librarian, wife of a superintendent, had to leave her book shelves to help operate the Gatling gun during a break. Prisoners ran a small store and drug dispensary. During one period the "druggist" was Frank Leslie, a Tombstone bartender and gun hand.

In the spring of 1880 while tending bar in an Allen Street saloon in the "town too tough to die" Frank Leslie tangled with a fellow barkeep named Mike Killeen. Guns came out from under aprons

but Mike lost the draw and the Widow Killeen soon became Mrs. Leslie. Later a gunnie named Will Claybourne went on the prod for Frank for one reason or another. They buried Mr. Claybourne on Boot Hill! But the Swisshelm Mountains north of Douglas and not far from Geronimo's Chiricahua hideout was the scene of the tragedy that put Frank Leslie on Yuma's "Rock." In a green-eyed jealous rage he shot and killed a two-timing girl friend and wounded a small boy during the row. Woman killing brought on the law and Frank was sentenced to ten years on Prison Hill.

Before the days of tommy-guns, Territorial Prison had their counterpart to discourage mustang prisoners. This was the Gatling gun, which had four revolving barrels that fired in rapid order with deadly effect. And in addition to a day and night vigil in watch towers, guards armed with high-caliber rifles constantly paced the masonry walls. But despite this, Indian trackers and natural setting, a few men did escape.

In one instance a bad case of gold fever aided a convict in pulling his freight. A guard named Walter O'Brien had been a prospector and still suffered the gold bug sting so badly he looked for pay dirt in the bottom of his coffee cup. Wise to this weakness a Mexican convict working on the prison farm caught the Irishman's eye and then fell to examining a chunk of rock. Because fabulous strikes had been made along the river before, O'Brien swallowed the lure.

"Show any color?" he queried eagerly, bending over the better to see.

Walter saw color—red! The prisoner abruptly crashed the "nugget" down on the guard's unsuspecting head, seized his rifle and disappeared in the underbrush. For once Indian trackers lost the trail and the man is known to have made his way to Old Mexico and freedom.

One prisoner whose mind fixed on a definite goal throughout a four-year stretch at Yuma was Will Fox. In 1882 Will watched helplessly while his brother Frank was shot down in cold blood by an Arizona lawman at Carrisco Creek in San Diego County, California. The lawman, Deputy Slankert, trailed the Fox brothers to California to arrest them as alleged accomplices of an eastern Arizona gang. They were working for a local cow outfit when he caught up. As Slankert started to make his play, for some reason Frank Fox started to walk away. The deputy triggered a lead slug into Frank's back, killing the boy instantly.

"As sure as the sun shines on the body of my dead brother," swore Will Fox before witnesses, "I'll get Slankert as soon as I serve my time."

Through his sentence on bleak Prison Hill Will Fox nursed his hate and immediately on release he went gunning for Deputy Slankert. Friends finally talked Will out of his errand, but had he ever met up with the lawman there most certainly would have been another obituary for the Tombstone Epitaph.

AMONG train robbers who did penance at Yuma were several of the Alvord gang. Two bandits held up the Southern Pacific at Cochise Station on September 9, 1899, and high-tailed with $10,000. Somehow, posses led by Deputy Burt Alvord of Willcox and Constable W. N. Stiles of Pearce were unable to find the outlaw holeout. The reason for the hunt's failure popped up some months later in the confession of a dying horse thief. It was revealed that Alvord and a well-heeled rancher named William Downing had planned the whole job and W. N. Stiles with a cowboy Matt Burts did the work. Burt Alvord made a getaway but Stiles, Burts and Downing were nabbed and sentenced to Territorial Prison.

In 1908, some time after his release from Yuma, Downing died in a brush with Arizona Rangers. Only then did the law find out why the prosperous cattle rancher William Downing had known so much about the technique of train robbery. He had learned from an expert—Sam Bass, most notorious train robber in Texas history!

One end of the Dungeon Block was reserved for women on those rare occasions when a feminine prisoner came to Yuma. Most famous member of the fair sex ever to grace Prison Hill was pretty, high-strung Pearl Hart, the Canadian school girl who became a gun-girl.

Christened Pearl Taylor, she ran away from a girls' seminary in Canada when only sixteen years old to marry a dark, good-looking, tin-horn gambler named Hart. Hart, like many another man of his profession, drifted to the Tombstone silver boom and with him into this raw, glittering life came wide-eyed Pearl.

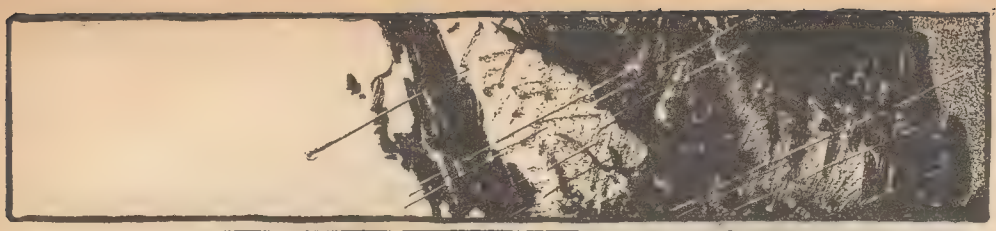
Pearl's union with Hart did not last long. Young, disillusioned, the foundation of her past crumbling under her feet, Pearl grew wild as the town. She whirled through various jobs, hit the glamor zones and gambling hells, lost on a mining venture and then fell in with a young miner who suggested they hold up the Benson-Solomonsville stage.

"Sure . . . sure, why not," said Pearl slowly, shrugging her small shoulders. A half smile played over her full, red mouth then and for an instant the girlish bloom seemed to return to her still young face. "I wonder," she mused aloud, "I wonder what the girls back in Canada would think of that. . . . Oh, hell, come on! Let's get going!"

The two amateurs staged a successful hold-up but got lost making a getaway and practically walked into the arms of a posse. Pearl was sentenced to ten years at Yuma. Almost from the minute of her arrival there she started bringing worry wrinkles to the faces of prison officials. She was as hard to handle as an unbroken filly until she learned that good behavior meant earlier pardon. Then she became a model prisoner and within a year received a full pardon. Never really "past praying for" Pearl Hart reformed, accepted vaudeville bookings and built a successful stage act around her sensational past career.

In 1909 Arizona Territorial Prison for political reasons was shifted to Florence and the grim fortress atop Yuma's Prison Hill fell into disrepair. A section of the Dungeon Block where Pearl Hart stayed and part of the yard were blasted away for a railroad cut. Yuma's first high school was built on top of the Main Cell and today the city's athletic teams bear the nickname "Criminals." The great bell, cast in San Francisco and shipped by boat up the Gulf of California and which once sounded prison alarms, was moved to a church in a town south of Yuma.

But, defying both man and elements, parts of the prison stand today for the curious to see—rock cell blocks with rusted iron doors and floor rings, the notorious "snake den," the old prison cemetery and weathered grave markers. In a life-term cell may be seen the dim outlines of a calendar scratched there by some forgotten prisoner and in another a poem. One cell retains its six rusting tiered bunks. So Yuma's Prison Hill remains, a grim relic of a bronco past—and its Desert Alcatraz.



Gamecock from Tennessee

A Novelet of Frontier War

By MORAN TUDURY

The Red Stick mingo halted, nocked the poisoned arrow—then Kinlock s whip left its stock, uncurled in a crack like thunder.

Bitter torrents of treachery and despair swept down on Old Hickory's lanky volunteer from Cumberland Gap. But a fighter yields only to Death!

TOM KINLOCK towered head and shoulders over the other volunteers who stood in line. His right hand gripped the hickory butt of the fifteen-foot bull whip, his left hand cradling the gamecock Satan against his great chest. In the pocket of his buckskin breeches was his volunteer's silver dollar that was going to buy a rifle in General Andy Jackson's army when it marched out of Fayetteville tomorrow morning to avenge the Fort Mims massacre. He had driven his six-pair mule hitch and Pennsylvania 'Stoga wagon southward all the way from Cumberland

Gap country—and he had arrived in time.

A man in the crowd yelled, "Hey, mountain boy, Old Hickory's already got a flagpole," and the onlookers laughed—they didn't much cotton to Cumberland Gap men.

"No Injun'll miss your scalp!" shouted another.

A drunken wagoner swayed out of the crowd toward Kinlock. "What's this here—a pigeon?" Hiccuping, he thrust a dirty finger at the gamecock. "Why, it ain't nothin' but a turtle-dove!"

Kinlock took notice of the hostility, for the first time. "Leave my turtle-dove be, friend," he advised the wagoner. "He'll saw your arm off, if he's of a mind to. Let him set."

The wagoner was thick-hewn, black-browed, with a knife scar on his left cheek dead white against swarthy skin. Encouragingly the crowd yelled to him, "Don't be scared of no chicken, Jake!" and it touched his pride.

"Saw my arm off like hell," he repeated. "I got a rooster that's a real demon. He'll hack out this pigeon's gizzard and eat it raw. My money says so!"

Tom Kinlock's great head and shoulders were turned toward the recruiting sergeant who sat on a box, using a big drum for his desk. Next to proving the prowess of his great whip, Kinlock best loved a sharp cocking main. Satan, Burnt Eye strain—black with lemon hackles—could out-gaff any cock in Tennessee. But now his heart flamed with a stronger cause.

"Bring that duck to the Wagon Wheel!" taunted the wagoner, as others took him away. "My Ramrod'll cut his throat!"

KINLOCK told the sergeant, "I'm Tom Kinlock. I come from Cumberland Gap and aim to fight with Andy Jackson." He tossed his silver dollar on the drumhead.

A corporal leaned down, whispered to the red-nosed sergeant.

The sergeant handed back his dollar. "You can't have a gun. I reckon I can't sign you up, no-how."

The watching crowd laughed. The spectacle of this giant volunteer, flatly turned down, was irresistibly comical. The roars further bewildered Tom Kinlock. Anger flushed his face.

"Them's my orders," the sergeant blew his red nose on a bandana, "I got to follow 'em," and for some reason winked.

Tom Kinlock's daddy and mammy had been scalped by Creek warriors. For years, impatiently he had bided the coming of vengeance. When word of the Fort Mims massacre had reached the Gap—two hundred and fifty whites slain—he felt his chance for revenge had arrived. The Mississippi Territory was being terrorized by Red Sticks and Billy Weatherford, their leader called Red Eagle, who was one-eighth Creek and seven-eighths murderous white devil. Crops had been destroyed, cattle slaughtered, cabins burned, and panic-stricken settlers even now were virtual prisoners in the stockades.

So Andy Jackson was going to reopen the Creek country. Andy Jackson who had kept Tom Kinlock from becoming a wood's colt. It was the General who had loaned him the money to buy his wagon and mules.

For Tom Kinlock this Creek war was a blood-feud. But he had no chance to argue. The soldier had beckoned to him to lean over.

"The Gen'l don't want you in the army—because he needs you for something himself," he said in a low voice. "He said when you come to town—and he had an idea you was going to come—to tell you to meet him at the Wagon Wheel."

Kinlock's indignation ebbed. Pride gradually suffused his great body. If Old Hickory had set aside a special task for him, that changed the picture. Maybe it was being a scout, like Davy Crockett from out Winchester way. Oblivious now of the crowd's jibes, he pocketed his dollar.

"See the Gen'l tonight," said the sergeant. "He wants you—you and that wagon of yours." Then he said, behind his hand, "Leave that drunken wagoner alone. He's a bad one to buck. And his brother's the town marshal."

Kinlock strode into the Wagon Wheel—forgotten now the jeers of the Fayettevillers and the drunken wagoner who had challenged him to bring Satan to this tavern. He was thinking of his new importance, and that the Wagon Wheel's proprietor was Jerry Logan . . . who had a red-headed daughter named Melissy.

"Oh, Tom—I just heard it. I could have burst with shame. To think they

won't even have you in the army!" It was Melissy, her cheeks flaming.

Appreciatively, he took in her energetic, rounded figure, large and sparkling emerald-green eyes, rooster-red hair. Easy to understand why the first sight of Melissy had stirred him when her pa brought her to the Nashville wagoners' dance and turkey shoot. However his admiration was somewhat dampened now. Her lament seemed to him unnecessarily loud. Patrons of the taproom were turning from their rum and talk of the Creek campaign to stare.

Melissy was screeching, "They say you're too big, Tom. That you're too poison big. You ain't a monster, are you, Tom? Say you ain't."

Kinlock grew uncomfortable. "No, I ain't too big—and I ain't a monster. Set down, Melissy, and stop that yelling." His big brown paw patted her hand. "You ought to be proud you got a big man, Melissy. I guess you got the most man in the whole Gap. These Fayettevillers are only green jealous."

The girl removed the corner of her apron from wet eyes. "I am proud. I want to tell 'em the truth. Why wouldn't the soldiers take you in the army?"

He released her hand, frowning. How could he tell her that Andy Jackson didn't want him in the infantry because he had reserved a certain, secret undertaking for Tom Kinlock? He knew that Melissy Logan would immediately blab the news all over town.

"Never mind. Trust me, don't you?"

"I trust you, Tom," breathlessly, "so go on and tell me."

"I guess I oughtn't to tell anybody, Melissy."

Her misery was replaced by feminine curiosity. "I reckon you can tell me."

"No, I reckon I can't."

She stood up, flushing to her ear tips. "Then I'll just let them talk against you. I won't take up for you. And I won't trust you. And—" she pulled off his dead mother's locket and threw it at him—"good-by to you, *Mister* Tom Kinlock!"

She ran from the room.

HE sat there, too angry to call after her. Other patrons were tittering, and Kinlock was weary of being laughed at. He turned, glaring. Then his eyes lit upon one more object calculated to ruffle his temper. A barrel-chested, swarthy man lurched into the taproom. Kinlock saw the dead-white scar on his left cheek, the red-headed, evil-beaked fowl held in his arms. The fowl was a red gamecock, Warhorse breed—its owner, the drunken wagoner.

"Come, did you?" he called out. "Now turn that turtle-dove loose!"

He led the way out to the stable-yard, Kinlock offering no objections. There was a time for a man's business, time for fighting. As a crowd gathered, he covered the wagoner's bet.

"Gaffed or clean?"

"Steeled," the wagoner snarled. "Ramrod'll kill your duck!"

Kinlock set the steel spurs, stood in the center ringed by the crowd, and faced the wagoner. He ruffled Satan's feathers, felt the bird tensing. Jerry Logan cried, "Point your roosters," and Kinlock released Satan.

Satan's jet-black blur, the Warhorse's red flashed together. Heads out-thrust, sidling—beak to beak—they sparred. Quick as light, the two cocks leaped into midair. The air filled with fluttering feathers. Kinlock nodded grimly. Now blood spattered the cobblestones. The red was down, Satan on him like a murderer. He flapped his wings, crowed. The red twitched, dyed deeper crimson in his own life-blood—at last lay still.

"Jerusalem," cried Jerry Logan, "I never seen a faster gaffing!"

The wagoner, still drunk but shocked stupid now, stood rigidly, staring down at the red cock. He remained standing there when Kinlock retrieved Satan, collecting his money, and returned to the taproom.

He fed the Burnt Eye corn grains from his hand. After the celebration drinks, the taproom gradually emptied, and he sat there alone with only the hearth fire hissing, the drowsy tick-tock of the clock's wooden works. He was not prepared for the interruption that came. There was a dull thump and his eyes riveted to the table-top. Amazed, he saw a long-knife sticking there—quivering.

He shoved back the chair, the gamecock fluttering to the floor. Through the gloom, Kinlock saw the wagoner, crazy-faced with

fury, and swinging a second knife.

"Kill my bird, will you? I'll give you killing aplenty—"

He lunged and Kinlock stepped aside. The wagoner came in, fast for his drunken state. Kinlock's right shoulder jerked, his hamlike fist catching the man full in the face. His heels drummed for purchase on the floor, missed—and he fell backward over table and chairs.

Kinlock breathed deeply, walking around the table. He looked down. The wagoner lay still, his head in the hearthstones. Blood trickled out from under the back of his head. His expression was frozen.

He was dead, Kinlock knew it. The truth struck him. He had killed this man. He wished there had been witnesses, began to wish it badly. Minutes ticked off.

Then he realized that there were witnesses—two of them. They emerged from the gloom, silently—he had not even known they were there. They gazed from him to the dead wagoner. One was a thin, wan-faced man of middle-age in black cloak, beaverskin hat. His skin was saffron-hued, with an odd yellowness that might have been malaria. Under bushy dark brows, jet-black eyes, by comparison, made the yellow skin hideous.

The other was a small, thin, jockeylike figure in buckskin. His teeth chattered, to Kinlock's mind like an excited monkey's.

"He jumped me." Kinlock wondered at his own wooden words. "He tried to knife me."

"Knife you?" repeated the yellow-faced man.

Kinlock said sullenly, "Look, there's the knife," pointing to the table. He heard the other man's voice.

"Knife? There isn't any knife there."

Sweat broke on him. "I tell you there was a knife. There were two of 'em—"

He searched for them. On his hands and knees, he hunted. He rose, suddenly sick in the pit of his stomach.

"It was self-defense," he said. "But I can't find the knives—"

"There aren't any knives," the yellow-faced man said. "Look, go away quickly. Get out now. Don't wait to be found here."

Kinlock's lips parted. He had nothing to hide. . . .

"Quickly," said the man. "You're a stranger here. You have killed a Fayetteville citizen. His brother is the marshal here. He'd hang you, himself. Move fast. Hurry, while there's time."

He shoved Kinlock out into the hall. As the door closed, Kinlock heard the odd monkey-like chatter of the little man's teeth. All over the house there was movement now, people crowding through the doors. Tom Kinlock stood there, strangely cold, shaken. A coach boy approached.

"The sojer wants you."

Slowly Kinlock raised his eyes, saw the red-nosed recruiting sergeant standing behind the boy.

"Upstairs, Kinlock," the sergeant said. "The Gen'l wants you. Shake a leg, Kinlock. Gen'l Jackson's waiting. The Gen'l don't wait for nobody."

IN the smoke-filled upstairs room, with a guard at the door, regular United States Army officers surrounding him, sat Old Hickory. His slight but whipleather-tough figure swung around, revealing his thin, sunken and long-nosed face. Kinlock saw the left arm in a sling, remembered gossip of the General's private shooting scrape back home. All of these details he noted with a chill yet on him, his brain dizzy with what had happened so suddenly in that accursed taproom.

The General's deep-set eyes took him in humorously as he observed to an officer, "Big, ain't he, Coffee? By the Eternal, we grow 'em brash in Tennessee. I knew you'd be here, Tom. I vowed it. Don't look so frighted, boy."

Kinlock stood, motionless.

The General rose with a groan. "Damme, this dysentery's killing me. There's nothing worse on earth than misery in a man's innards!" He took Kinlock's arm, moved with him to a wall map. His cold pipe indicated its surface. "That's where we're going, Tom—where we'll smash Billy Weatherford. Damn his renegade hide!"

Kinlock tried to deafen his ears to the uproar downstairs.

"I've kept a special place for you, Tom," Andy Jackson said. "For a man like you—that hates the red 'uns. By damn, I need you, Tom Kinlock. You'll see how bad."

Through Kinlock's gloom cut the Gen-

eral's voice—recalling that this was to be his moment of vindication. No matter what else waited for him down below there, nobody would say that Andy Jackson's army couldn't use Tom Kinlock.

"It ain't soldiers I want," the General was saying. "I got soldiers from hell and back. It'll take a miracle to get all I got right now down the Tennessee to the Creek country. It ain't that that's worrying me, boy. And it ain't the Red Sticks. By hell, we'll clean *them* out. We'll open the frontier so a babe could walk it safe. I vow it."

He took the brandy an officer handed him, "Good for the belly, Tom," he commented. "Ain't nothing like it when there's misery in your innards." He picked up the cold pipe, returned to the map. "Now, we'll move by Huntsville and Ditto's Landing and clear across the Raccoon Mountains. And Fort Strother will be our base. But by damn," he observed feelingly, "we'll have to hack a road out of the wilderness to get there."

He touched Tom Kinlock's shoulder. "There's where you come in; Tom," he said. "You'll come over the road we make. And it won't be much. As a road, it won't be worth a tinker's damn. But you'll have to come over it and bring our supplies. You'll bring corn and flour in wagons. You'll drive beef on the hoof. And you'll get 'em to us—or our army's finished and done for."

Jackson turned, faced his officers, and one quickly refilled the general's glass.

"Gentlemen," he told them, "it ain't Weatherford and it ain't the Red Sticks we got to fear. It's famine. It's starvation. It's geting the victuals to our army. That's our real enemy. There ain't a civilian contractor I can trust, not one inch. They're liars and traitors and thieves—all of 'em. And that's why I need Tom Kinlock."

Kinlock stared.

"You'll ride the wagons, Tom," the general patted his arm. "You'll come after us with one of the wagon teams. Then I'll know, by hell, that one train, anyhow, will reach us in time!"

Kinlock swallowed. It came to him as a shock that he was not going to be a scout like Davy Crockett from Winchester. He was going to ride a wheeler mule in a wagon train—like any teamster. His disappointment was such a blow that for an instant he forgot that downstairs was a man dead by his own hand.

The general was waving to the guard at the door. "Bring that yellow-livered contractor in, Sam'l," he called. "Run him in."

THE guard stepped outside. Into the room walked the man Tom Kinlock had just left below stairs in that death-filled taproom—the yellow-skinned man in the cloak. Behind, scuttled the jockeylike figure in buckskin.

"Tom," said the General. "Here's the contractor—Joe Baptiste. You'll ride with him as the train captain." Then some of the tumult from below at last seemed to reach Andy Jackson's ears. "What the devil's that?" he demanded. "Is this blasted place on fire?" He glared at the contractor.

Joe Baptiste had removed his beaver-skin hat. His head showed bald and yellow and crinkled as the wall map.

"A man was killed, General," he explained in his stilted book-English. "The murderer escaped. But my servant and I saw him ride down the road. We showed the posse which road he took—it was to the south, the Unicoy Road."

Jackson frowned, then he turned to Tom Kinlock.

"Tom," he said, "remember your scalped daddy and mammy and get that wagon train to me, come hell or high water. I'll need those rations sore. The Thirty-ninth Infantry ought to be somewhere behind you. If you need 'em, maybe they'll come up in time."

Kinlock said thickly, "Yes, sir."

"You heard that, Baptiste?" Jackson growled.

"Yes, General," the yellow-faced man spoke softly. "Yes, General." For an instant it seemed to Kinlock that the jet-black eyes met his own, thoughtfully, lingeringly—and with a questioning look.

Then all were going downstairs. And now it occurred to him. He might have thrown the whole case of the wagoner's death on General Jackson's hands. But he could not go back there before all of those officers—not after what the civilian contractor had said. He'd sound like a liar

or a fool. And the contractor was assuring him that now there was no longer even the necessity to trouble.

"I showed the posse," he said quietly to Kinlock. "I pointed out where the murderer rode away. They set out in pursuit. They'll ride all night—his brother was the marshal. But who knows if they'll overtake him? Whether they'll be in time?"

Baptiste smiled slightly, his teeth gnarled and yellowed as his skin.

Without witnesses, he could not prove he had killed in self-defense. And the wagoner's knives had disappeared. He shook his head about that. He was still confused about the knives that had vanished. It was something he did not understand. But he knew the proverbial temper of the Fayettevillers, was relieved. They hated Cumberland Gap men—would have shown him short shrift had they believed he was the murderer of the brother of the town marshal. His own action was wholly guiltless; hadn't he been criminally attacked?

"Come hell or high water," the contractor was repeating the General's words in his sing-song way of talking. He looked at Kinlock. "Well, well," he said quietly, "we must try. Hey, Captain?"

Kinlock did not answer. All at once his feeling of relief vanished. Instinctively, he was wondering if he had made a mistake. His was a disturbing secret—shared with a man whom all of his senses now were telling him he would be a fool to trust.

He wished Melissy was with him—to talk with. That someone else knew the truth.

II

TOM KINLOCK stood in the stirrups of the left-side wheeler mule, his long whip cracking over the team with the explosiveness of mountain thunder. The beasts strained against their collars; the six-inch iron tires shuddered in the mud; the big 'Stoga wagon creaked, rattling its trace chains; on the box, Satan flapped his wings.

"Hup, hup, hup!" Kinlock urged his hitch. The wheels spun free of the mire and the team lurched through the cold winter rain and jolted by the tree stumps along Andy Jackson's military road.

Behind him, Kinlock heard the reports of whips, bawled curses from seven other wagons, the drovers who gadded one hundred and sixty stumbling beeves, damning them to hell.

He reechoed everyone of their curses. But the back-breaking road, freezing rain—the fact that there had been no sight of the promised Thirty-ninth Infantry traveling behind him—were but part of his troubles. Now he understood—why the General said everything depended on getting a wagon train through to his army. He understood the importance of it too well.

The train had been late leaving Fayetteville. Everything had seemed to conspire against a prompt start. Sufficient wagons, sturdy in construction, had been hard to find. Joe Baptiste consumed days, hand-picking the wagoners and drovers. The beeves had come all the way from Nashville. To Kinlock, fretting at each delay, everything revealed the civilian-contractor system at its worst. And the Indian runners brought in news that hourly only added to his anxiety. Jackson had already encountered the Red Sticks. He had destroyed their village at Tallushatchee and shot down like dogs fully two hundred of them. Six days later, when the Red Sticks made a stand farther south at Talladega, Old Hickory had thrown a circle of rifle-fire around them and slain three hundred more. But for the shameful giving way of a detachment of volunteers, he might have accounted for a clean thousand.

But that was the bright side of the picture. The dark side threatened, as the General had fearfully prophesied, to nullify his entire campaign—victories notwithstanding.

He had twice defeated Billy Weatherford in battle, but other, more formidable, forces, now foreboded disaster. The Red Stick leader had stripped the country of every ear of corn, every beef; and two wagon trains which had set out to Jackson's relief had broken their axles and backs on the road to Fort Strother and, harried by attacking Creek bands, had been compelled to turn back to Fayetteville. In Jackson's camp starving volunteers and militiamen were eating roots and acorns;

the General himself, despite dysentery so exhausting he could scarcely stand, had had to hold back deserters at gunpoint.

Also, the runners' dispatches had made plain the worst implication of this peril.

If Andy Jackson were forced to fall back now, five thousand Choctaws, Cherokees and hitherto friendly Creeks would be encouraged to join Weatherford's Red Sticks immediately. The impassioned plea of Tecumseh for a confederacy of Indian nations would be answered. To the last red man, they would strike for Aba Inki and "The Open Door."

Such were the thoughts that oppressed Tom Kinlock as he slashed at his struggling mules, drove them, reeling and staggering over this hell-road through the mountains. An army, hundreds of white settlers' lives, hung on his train and he knew it. The General's charge beat through his brain, *"Come hell or high water, Tom—get your wagons through!"*

And then there was the thought of Melissy. He had not seen her since that night. . . .

Under him, the wheeler mule abruptly halted. From behind, the oncoming wagon crashed against the animal's rump, propelling it violently into the pair ahead. The mule plunged wildly and Kinlock sprawled on its neck. His whole hitch—six suddenly alarmed mules—began milling in panic.

"Whoa! Whoa!" He fought to free himself from the tangle of harness, sawing reins, splitting the dusk with his profanity.

Now he had them quieted, bringing the whole train to a standstill. He got down, frowning, and his mind suddenly was bitterly alert.

He had discovered the trouble, and the nature of it froze his face in bleak lines of anger. The iron links of the trace chains had severed. Feeling them, he detected the smoothness of the break. They had been filed. The filer had hoped for their parting when the team was moving at top speed—that the rumbling wagon would send Kinlock down in a havoc of rolling wheels, kicking hoofs. Only luck had parted the chains now, with the wagon proceeding laboriously at hardly more than a walk.

HE stood there, chill rain beating into his face. This was not the first time death had reached for him since the departure from Fayetteville. Two nights out, inexplicably his team had stampeded squarely at him as he lay on the ground sleeping. Some sixth sense had roused him, enabling him to roll from their path just in time. On that occasion, he had found the tethering-ropes slashed.

He swung around. Joe Baptiste had ridden up, muffled in the great black cloak, his beaverskin hat dripping.

"You have trouble?" the contractor asked in his strange, genteel English. "Something is wrong?"

Kinlock said shortly, "Somebody don't want this train to get through. That's all," and exhibited the broken trace chains.

The contractor's malaria-stamped face seemed to whiten. His thin, bloodless lips compressed. As if fearful of being overheard, he spoke in a low voice.

"Many things are wrong here," he said. "One of the drovers was poisoned an hour ago. That Cajun, Pitou. I put him in a wagon. He vomits every minute." The school-teacher voice was a restless, complaining whine. "Then there is a boy in the drovers. A boy with red hair. I don't know how he slipped in. He was not hired. I know—I hired all of them."

Kinlock studied him. He cursed himself for the sour fortune that had entrusted his fatal secret with this strange-talking man. Not once, even by implication, had Joe Baptiste reminded him that his sealed lips shielded Kinlock perhaps from a public lynching. No reminder was necessary. Fayetteville had been roused to mob pitch, handbills everywhere offering big sums for the capture of the wagoner's slayer. Fayetteville had been in no frame of mind to listen to an explanation from a man who had killed the brother of its town marshal.

That mob's fury, sight of the windowless jail with its nine-inch walls, had locked Kinlock's lips. The haste and urgency for getting his wagon train under way had filled every waking hour. General Jackson's departure, during the middle of the night, had been the final argument to persuade Kinlock. It was no time for a clean-breasted revelation.

But he regretted it now, bitterly abusing

himself. Instinct warned that his safety was in the hands of two men whom he distrusted. In a way, they had tricked him —something few had been able to do to Tom Kinlock. But for their presence in the taproom, he would immediately have made public his act of self-defense. It was Baptiste who had persuaded him he would be regarded as a murderer. What had become of those knives?

He roused himself, said, "I'll see the drover now," went off afoot, calling out orders to pitch camp for the night. And he kept thinking, why did Joe Baptiste want me in his power . . .?

The Cajun drover lay on his belly in a wagon, head hanging over the tailgate. He was gagging himself with a handful of flour, his retching filling the night. Then sweat was wiped from the sharp, dark-featured face and snapping-turtle eyes regarded Kinlock. White teeth showed in a grin, under the circumstances, almost demoniacal.

"*Diable!* Almost I am turned outside in—me, Louey Pitou!"

As if revivified by his indignation, the Cajun raised on an elbow, spat green over the tailgate.

"I am chewing perique," he recounted soddenly, "and I am a happy man. I am cold, but what does that matter? When I, Louey Pitou, am chewing perique, I am happy. Then I swallow. Sacred Mother, what do I swallow—*nightshade!* In my plug of perique somebody has put nightshade. It cannot be that I am not dead now . . . Am I alive, *m'sieu,* or am I dead? Tell me."

Kinlock regarded the fierce little man wonderingly. "If it was nightshade, you're lucky to be alive."

"I will find this assassin," the Cajun promised feelingly. A knife slipped from his belt—the longest knife Kinlock had ever seen, perhaps of the kind used in the Louisiana canefields. "I will find him. Then I chop his head off!"

A thought stirred Kinlock. "Who is this boy with the drovers? A boy who wasn't hired but slipped in?"

The Cajun appeared evasive, answering uneasily.

"Leave the boy alone. *Diable!* He is only a boy whom they beat at home. He is running away."

"I'll send you rum," Kinlock said. "It'll warm your belly."

Gratitude showed in the Cajun's expression. He leaned forward, spoke softly.

"There is much danger for you," he said quickly. "Everywhere, merciful *Dieu*—danger." His head jerked at the woodland that pressed along this crude, narrow road. "Everywhere, they are there—the Red Sticks. All day I hear them. Like this . . . gliding, gliding. They slip amongst the trees. They are waiting. *Diable!* But they will not wait long. Sacred Mother, it will be hot here soon."

Kinlock had expected it for thirty-six hours but decided he was prepared. Not a man in the train but didn't carry his rifle primed and ready. His force, twenty men, should be enough to beat off any average-sized raid.

He stumbled along the wagon line to where the drovers were bedding down the beeves for the night. Then he saw the boy. A small, rounded boy in tattered homespun and fur cap, his face smeared out of all human resemblance with mud. As Kinlock stood there, the boy saw him. He whirled, hurrying behind the shelter of the shifting cattle.

Puzzlement touched Kinlock. Something about this boy was familiar. He stood, frowning.

TWO of the wagoners came toward him, walking rapidly. Between them strode an Indian. He was a high-type Creek warrior, naked to the waist, his body streaked with vermilion. Alongside his single scalp-lock feather hung a white deer-tail.

The Creek raised two fingers of his right. "I come," he said.

Kinlock returned the sign of friendship. "You come," he repeated.

The runner said, "The warriors of Red Eagle are around you. They are almost ready to attack. I am Red Ax. I bring warning."

"I give thanks for my brother's warning."

Red Ax, the Creek, loosened the hatchet in his belt. "My brother will be wise to prepare at once."

Kinlock gave his orders to the two wagoners. The train had already begun to draw into a roughly shaped circular

formation, hindered by trees, stumpage. Wagons crashed against trunks, mules kicking, bucking. Everywhere was hurry, confusion. In his haste, Kinlock ran squarely into the drover boy, knocking him down. Then he stood flat-footed, amazed at what he saw.

The boy's cap had fallen off. Rooster-red hair tumbled down his shoulders. Through the smears of mud, emerald-green eyes tearfully looked up at Kinlock.

"Tom," it was Melissy's voice crying to him. "I had to come. I couldn't stay mad at you. I had to come and warn you that—"

Her voice was drowned out.

The long, wailing cry of a catamount reverberated through the woodland—twice was answered.

A wagoner who stood near Kinlock ran to the edge of the road. He lifted his rifle but did not fire. He had no time. Kinlock heard the zinging whir through the air—the sort, slurring thump. The wagoner dropped his rifle, grabbed at his throat. He half-spun, fell on one knee, coughing.

Then Kinlock saw the arrow in the man's throat. Instantly the dusk was rent by a drover's shout:

"Here they come!"

Kinlock ran for his wagon and the rifle-gun General Jackson had sent to him before leaving Fayetteville. It was cherry-stocked, with an octagonal barrel, and if Tom Kinlock couldn't hit a Creek skulker with it at two hundred yards he never would touch it again. He snatched it from the wagon-bed, flattening himself under the wheels. Then he saw the first skirmisher. The Red Stick slipped from behind a tree, lifted a musket.

Kinlock's trigger finger squeezed; fire flashed from the pan. The Indian's musket clattered to earth. Its owner weaved drunkenly for a few yards, fell on his face.

From the wagons only desultory fire sounded. In the dusk, here and there, flashes showed red-orange. But there weren't enough flashes to satisfy Kinlock. He waited till he had the bead on another attacker, shot him through the head, then sprang up. He moved around amongst his men, suddenly raging.

"Shoot, fools! Do you want to die?"

He couldn't understand the reason for the men's half-heartedness. Some were firing too high, others with an infuriating casualness that nonplussed him. One caught his angry eye—reloading as unhurriedly as a man at a turkey shoot. He was measuring his powder charge like a contestant shooting for a Fourth of July prize. As he knelt there, Kinlock's big boot collided with his trouser-seat, spilling powder, patches and all.

"You yellow dog! These red 'uns won't spare you!" he yelled at him. "They'll roast you alive!"

Awed by Kinlock's gigantic bulk, the man scampered back to the gun. He grabbed up the rifle, dropped the ball into the muzzle without a patch and fired hastily.

The Creek runner, Red Ax, was following Kinlock's example, urging the train's defenders to greater effort, pausing only to fire, reload. The Cajun, Louey Pitou, climbed from the wagon. He leaped outside the wagon circle, fired, jumped back to safety and became fearsomely sick. A Red Stick's body showed over a wagon-tongue. Kinlock dropped his empty rifle, leaped with a knife. The warrior spat in Kinlock's face, swung his hatchet. Then Kinlock's left hand had him by the throat, the knife sinking into the dark belly and slashing clear across.

Kinlock flung the quivering body from him. Melissy was running behind him reloading his gun—white-faced, her red hair streaming down her mud-smeared neck. He grabbed the rifle, jumped to the wagon box. An Indian's face bobbed up, almost pressed flat against the muzzle. Kinlock squeezed the trigger and the dark face abruptly shattered before his eyes. Kinlock looked down. Satan was running crazily around under the wagon, screeching.

HE picked up his big whip and cracked its fifteen-foot length — moving around the wagon circle, he blasted it over the train's defenders.

"Damn you—shoot!"

The reluctant riflemen turned, saw the giant with the great bull whip. Its thunder smote their eardrums, curled over their craning necks. They bent and fired, reloaded furiously, seemed to fire almost without stopping. Now, out in the woodland, through the floating, reeking smoke-haze, sounded the screams of stricken war-

riors. They were falling back, dragging their dead. One Red Stick broke half through the wagons. His hatchet flashed above the head of Louey Pitou. The Cajun looked up—too late. But Kinlock's whip had swung. It slashed across the Stick's eyes and he screamed, pitched backward into the road, kicking.

In a half hour there came a lull. Kinlock sent the wagoners out into the road, running. He drove them before him, sending volley after volley on the heels of the fleeing Red Sticks.

When he returned to the wagons it was to behold a curious tableau. Joe Baptiste, visible now for the first time since the hostilities, bent over a man's still body.

"It was a mistake," he was speaking aloud, "a mistake," and Kinlock puzzled over the strange words. Then he saw the dead man. It was the contractor's monkey-like servant. His neck had been all but sawed off by a great knife.

Melissy was waiting for him, but Kinlock did not pause. For past her now he saw the quick, alert figure of the Cajun—and Louey Pitou was beckoning insistently.

"Come, we will talk," he told Kinlock quickly. "Only a little talk but it will tell you plenty. You should know."

He leaned against the wagon hub and began to speak. And as his words sank in, Kinlock's attentiveness grew and he listened—and was awed.

"Better you turn back to Fayetteville," the Cajun told him, his earnestness unmistakable. "This train never can get to Jackson. You don't understand. It is impossible for this train to get through."

Kinlock spat. "It'll get through."

The Cajun laughed softly, and Kinlock saw the bloody smears on the great canebrake knife at his belt. The Cajun understood his glance, nodded. "I caught the poisoner. It was the servant of Baptiste. I saw the nightshade in his jacket. *Diable,*" he said simply. "He is finished. I sent him to hell."

He suddenly uttered one word, "Baptiste."

Kinlock stared.

"Baptiste is the reason this train will never reach your General Jackson." The Cajun nodded. "Look, me, I come from N' Orleans. I am Louey Pitou. I go everywhere; I see everything—on the flatboat, the levee, the Natchez Trace. And I tell you what I know. Never will this train reach Jackson. Baptiste will never allow it."

He took Kinlock's arm, peered into his face. "You are a brave man, Captain. But you don't know much. Listen, I tell you very quick." He wiped the bloodied knife on the grass, replaced it in his belt. "I tell you the whole thing."

He asked, "What do you think your General Jackson is doing? Destroying the army of Weatherford—yes, he is doing that. But that is not all. Your General has a fine big secret. But many men know his secret. I, Louey Pitou, who go everywhere—I know your General's secret. In N' Orleans they all know it. They talk about it in the cafes and coffee houses." He nodded. "The secret is this: When your General finishes with the Red Sticks, it will not be the real finish of his campaign. Your General will go on from there. He will march on—to Mobile. Then he will capture Pensacola and kick out the Spanish. He will open an American road clear to the Gulf. That, my Captain, is the secret plan of your General Jackson."

Kinlock stared, spat on his hands. "Then, by damn, I'm with him," he said.

THE Cajun laughed. "You are not with him yet, my Captain. You are far, far from being with him. Already, the Spanish know of his plan. Look now amongst our dead here. You will find they have been slain with soft British lead and stinking Spanish powder. The Spanish are arming the Red Sticks. They will arm them to hold back your General from reaching Pensacola. It is all very simple." He leaned closer. "What do you think is the nationality of Joe Baptiste? Why does he speak your language like a professor? Because he has learned English from a professor. Why is he so yellow? It is not all malaria. He is a Spaniard. And he, too, knows the secret of your General Jackson."

The Cajun smiled. "Baptiste accepted your General's contract for supplies—for two reasons. Because he takes the contract, it does not go to a loyal contractor. Also, it gives him supplies and free passage through American land—*to bring his sup-*

plies to the Red Sticks. The Spanish will pay Baptiste well. You understand now. In one blow he feeds the allies of the Spanish, and at the same time starves out your General. By damn, admit it—the man is clever!"

Kinlock's growl burred his throat. But the Cajun only laughed. "For me, I did not care. I am a Cajun and I hate all nations. My N' Orleans—four times she has been handed over to other countries. I have no country! When Baptiste hired his men at Fayetteville, it was easy to see that, for him, I was a safe man—one who belonged to no flag. His servant poisoned me only because I protected the red-headed boy, whom I could see was a girl . . . perhaps the adored of my Captain?"

The little man's eyes sparkled. "Then you sent me rum for my poor belly. And now you have saved my life with your big whip. So I tell you this story. I warn you, in return and with thanks. I tell you this train will not get through to your General. Go back, now, to Fayetteville. Go while yet there is time."

Kinlock stood, rigid.

"You saw how bad these wagoners fight?" the Cajun argued. "It was planned for them to surrender. The Red Sticks were to take the wagons and free us all. But you made the wagoners fight. Captain, you are a terrific man. I know. I am Louey Pitou. I go everywhere and know all things." He laughed again.

Kinlock thought, and it did not take him many thoughts to see the truth. If Joe Baptiste surrendered this train now, General Jackson was whipped and it would be a long time before Americans again mastered the southeastern frontier. If these wagons now were surrendered, then forever in his mind Tom Kinlock would feel he had been a traitor to his country and the man who was his benefactor.

But his mind was made up. If Old Hickory said *"Forward"*—then that was Tom Kinlock's order. He turned from the Cajun.

The little man grabbed his arm. "What you do now?"

Kinlock said harshly, "I'll show you."

"My Captain, you are a fool!"

Kinlock laughed. The Cajun's eyes widened, and suddenly he smiled. *"Diable,"* he said. "You are a man what I like." He slid the canebrake knife clear. "You are terrific. Did I not tell you so?" He fell in behind Kinlock and they walked toward the fire where Joe Baptiste now stood.

The contractor looked up from warming his cold yellow hands. For once his composure was shaken. In Tom Kinlock's face he read enmity clearly.

"What is it?"

"This," Kinlock said and jerked the pistol from the contractor's belt. With one huge, hamlike hand he grasped him. "Cajun, get me a rope."

Joe Baptiste struggled. But Kinlock's hand held him in a vise.

"What is this!" he repeated.

"It ain't hard to follow," Kinlock said coolly. "It means my train goes through. Like Old Hickory says, it'll reach him—hell 'r high water!"

III

WHEN Baptiste was securely tied Kinlock sent the Cajun to summon the men. They came sullenly, regarding the prisoner with dogged and uneasy eyes. Kinlock understood now why this crew willingly would have betrayed the supply train, General Jackson's cause. Of the raid's fifteen survivors, most were greasy, dark-complexioned, from swarthy-faces that must have been at least part Spanish, to one massive Krooman, in all likelihood a fugitive slave from Mississippi Territory. The single out-and-out American was a bearded, simpleton-eyed Kentuckian who returned his gaze with slacked mouth, empty stare.

At Kinlock's side Melissy and the Cajun each stood with a rifle. When he began to speak, Red Ax moved from the tree where he had been looking on, joined them. Joe Baptiste took in the scene silently—eyes as unmoving as a water moccasin's.

Kinlock curtly indicated the trussed-up Spaniard. "There's your leader." Then his big hand waved toward the wagons. "And yonder are three men who followed his orders—and died." In the heavy silence, he announced, "Now, mark me. This train ain't going to get stuck in the mud. And it won't surrender to the red 'uns. It's moving on to Fort Strother. I'm taking it there. I'll kill every one of

you to get it there." He dismissed them. "Now go bury your pardners."

They turned away without answer, only their expressions showing their true hostility.

AFTER he ate the burgoo and tafula prepared by the train cook, the burly Krooman, Kinlock listened to Melissy's story while he fed Satan corn grains from his hand.

"Why didn't you trust me, Tom Kinlock?" She huddled against him like a cold child. "I could have kept your secret. I kept my own, didn't I? I joined this train, didn't I? I tramped all these miles, didn't I? And the only one who found me out was that Cajun. I loved you enough to come. Didn't I, Tom Kinlock?"

He regarded her solemnly. Here was the last spot in the world he would have wanted to see Melissy. But she was here and would have to stay.

She nodded toward the other campfire where the wagoners and drovers ate. "Some of 'em used to come into the taproom and drink. I heard what they'd say. Always it was talk about how your train wouldn't get through. I didn't understand, but it frightened me. Right then I made up my mind, Tom Kinlock. I was going to be with you. If you weren't going to get through, then I didn't want to go through, either—not with anything, anywhere . . . not without you."

Her mud-smeared hand went to her throat, removed from her bosom a slender chain. It was his mother's locket.

"I found it on the floor," she said. "It was lying there."

Kinlock cleared his throat, patted her hand. "Melissy," he said, "you're a good girl. I wish you wasn't here. I wish you was back home with your pa." He smiled slowly. "But I'll say this—" he inspected the mire-crusted little figure, tattered boy's clothes, battered shoes; then stood up and tried to restrain his real feelings. "Sister, go wash your face," he told her. "You got more dirt on you than a mud hen."

She laughed as he left her, and it affected him strangely—a girl's clear laughter in a spot such as this one now.

He took the first watch, and while the others slept moved around amongst the wagons, Andy Jackson's gift rifle-gun in the crook of his arm. Now and again his glance turned to the bound figure of the Spanish prisoner.

Joe Baptiste had never spoken since that first remonstrance. Secured to a wagon wheel, he huddled there, the battered beaverskin hat cocked with lunatical jauntiness on his bald head. His yellowed skin showed no warmth, even by the fire's reflection. It was cold, still—the fixed eyes motionless as a cotton-mouth's.

Kinlock thought . . . why don't I have it in me to kill this man? With Joe Baptiste dead, the worst menace to the wagon train would be wiped out. Another thought . . . The monkey-like servant was gone. Only Baptiste remained to share Kinlock's dark secret of the slain wagoner in that Fayetteville taproom.

He argued. Revealed now as an enemy of General Jackson's forces, how could Baptiste harm him—no matter what lying testimony he might in future trump up? Yet Kinlock was not satisfyingly convinced. Something deathlessly evil was reflected in those motionless, almost reptilian eyes. Back in Fayetteville, the Spaniard had many high-up connections. The town marshal would never cease the hunt for his brother's slayer. Given the chance, Baptiste might still wield his murderous accusation again Tom Kinlock. Given the chance. . . .

But Kinlock could not kill in cold blood. He knew it, and reckoned it for his weakness. But he would guard the Spaniard, watch him. Baptiste must not escape to bring back the Red Stick raiders. Or to return to town, either, and re-arouse the vengeance-angered Fayettevillers.

It was clear now why he had not found the drunken wagoner's two knives—Baptiste and his servant had secured them. Somehow, they had learned that the General intended a special mission for Tom Kinlock. The killing Baptiste had capitalized as a sword over his head.

He stirred. Satan had fluttered onto a down wagon-tongue. The gamecock thrust his head under his wing, cawed sleepily. Kinlock leaned against a water-oak, listening. For a moment he had seemed to hear, far away in the dark forest, a catamount's cry. But he might have imagined it. Now he heard only the thinly pitched whistle of a quail, a deer's dainty stir as it moved

through the thickets seeking some hidden salt lick.

WITH daylight, cold, overcast, they moved off, Kinlock making his changes in the caravan. The massive Krooman replaced him astride the lead-team wheeler. Riding Baptiste's horse, Kinlock took position at the tail end, trailing the beeves. From here was an unobstructed survey of the train's entire length. His great bull whip, rolled around its own hickory butt, was thrust into a rifle scabbard; he liked the feel of it near him. Fifty yards ahead, rifle across her pommel, rode Melissy. Farther, straddling a mule, was the Cajun. Red Ax walked with the lead wagon.

Mutiny would not be easy under such constant surveillance. His instructions, purposely uttered in the hearing of all, promised prompt reprisal for the first rebellious act. On the wagon box nearest Louey Pitou sat the bound Spaniard. Alone, the Cajun's griping belly was reminder to keep his poisoner's master well guarded.

Bad as the road had been previously, now it proved all but impassable. Hurry or fatigue had slighted the axes of the General's woodsmen here. Stumpage barred almost every yard's advance. The train had no choice but to follow the twisting, tortuous trail, that wound without letup around the tree-trunks, through brush, menaced from above by bare, low-hanging limbs that swayed in the winter's blast. Like all paths, mostly it followed the ridges. And added to its hardships was an alternating uphill haul, then downgrade rush—with the wagoners leaning their bodies against the fierce strain of reins, rising full height with both feet on the foot-brakes.

The Raccoon Passes filled with their tumult—grinding, rutted wheels, cracking whips, cursing men, gadded cattle lowing fearfully. And Kinlock drove them remorselessly, unceasingly, with no rest or peace.

Despite the bitter cold of the ridge, he favored it to the ravines. Its very stark bareness was reassurance against ambush. Down off the heights, with the imprisoned wind humming like a thousand demons amongst scrub pines and white oak, everywhere he sensed unseen enemies. From Old Hickory's map, Kinlock calculated that the passes would grow narrower till finally they broke through to Coosa River —and at last Fort Strother. Any of the mountain chutes was a ready-made death trap. In these rocky defiles no circular defensive formation for a wagon train was possible. Strung out, it could be chopped off in sections, annihilated piece-meal like the severed body of a snake. Aided only by two men and a girl, he could not hope long, in the event of attack, to control this hostile caravan. Deeply he yearned for a sight of the Thirty-ninth.

Ceaselessly, he rode up and down the train, strained eyes probing for trouble's first sign. He scanned the woodland path ahead, dirt-grimed drovers who stared from sullen eyes, wagoners who lurched in the saddle and silently cursed him, he knew, as he passed.

He reexamined the ropes binding Baptiste to the wagon box. The prisoner watched him, silent as a perched vulture, black button eyes unwinking. The bonds would have held a mountain bear.

"Don't trouble about this one," the Cajun said reassuringly. "One move, and I cut his heart out. I, Louey Pitou, am a very glad man. For the first time now I got me a country—the country and flag of my Captain. It make me feel proud. If this *loup-garou* try but once for to injure my country. . . ." He touched the canebrake knife gently, with obviously deep affection.

Tom Kinlock moved ahead to Red Ax. "You have seen something, my brother."

The warrior spoke quietly, "Everywhere I read their sign. Behind at the last creek, the Red Sticks had slain a deer. Clearly I saw there blood drops on the leaves." He gazed at the sun which was sinking. "They will not attack in daylight—perhaps later. They fear the terrible White Giant whose big whip strikes as Aba Inki's right hand."

They were now entering a canyon so narrow that its steep, wooded sides hugged the roads like walls. Farther on, Kinlock saw, the trail widened slightly. But here, at its mouth, the entrance rose on both sides sheer, stark as the frame of a door, and the first wagon seemed scarcely to squeeze through. Yet dark, confining, foreboding as the canyon loomed, his heart

leaped at the sight. Because now he reckoned they were near. From Old Hickory's map, he remembered the area indelibly. For five miles the canyon would run—when it reached the other side there would lie Fort Strother!

He looked up and saw a runner coming toward them. Like Red Ax, the courier wore the full war-paint, single scalp-lock feather of a Creek warrior. He approached steadily but, reaching them, he swayed exhaustedly against Kinlock's stirrup. His face was gray as he spoke to Red Ax, haltingly yet at length.

Kinlock heard the interpretation. "He is Lone Tree who comes from *Old Jacksa Chulo Harjo—*" Kinlock understood: to the Creeks, even his allies, Old Hickory was known as "Old Mad Jackson." Red Ax continued, "My red brother comes as *Il-le-hi-ah,*" and with cold fingers clutching his heart, Kinlock figured this to mean "messenger of death." Said Red Ax, "The Fort is just outside at the end of the canyon there—only a few miles. But the volunteer soldiers of your great leader are fleeing in all directions—many lost in the forests. For days they have eaten nothing and have deserted in huge numbers. There is much sickness, and now the Dark One calls many to his icy lodge. *Old Jacksa Chulo Harjo* is weak and ailing. At Fort Strother there is no longer a mighty army but less than two hundred men."

Kinlock's heart flamed against those militiamen who had betrayed his stricken General in this dark hour.

The warrior said, "At the Fort are expected many of the regular army of the Great White Father—from Fayetteville, where you have come. If they arrive there will be enough troops at the Fort, though no food. But the new troops have not yet come."

KINLOCK sent the courier back to the Krooman's wagon for food. Behind the Raccoon, there, he knew Andy Jackson now was in hell's depths. No hope loomed for his sick leader but this train and, still farther behind it somewhere in the hills—granted that they had even started—reinforcements of the Thirty-ninth United States Infantry. In the upstairs room at the Wagon Wheel that night—regardless of what might have been his direst forebodings—not even Andrew Jackson could have foreseen that the sands of his fortune would run this low.

But Kinlock's heart beat fiercely. It could only be a few miles now. Then this canyon would suddenly debouch into the open once more.

A shout from behind roused him. Raising his head, he noted that the road had narrowed almost to a bridle-path on either side, hemmed in by thick tree growths. In places the wagons were scraping as they passed. Now the rearmost wagon and the beeves had entered the canyon. The thought came to Kinlock. One man and a rifle, on this narrow trail, could hold off a whole wagon train. He cantered to the rear and the scene of the outcry.

A mule had fallen and broken its leg. While the train halted, Kinlock hurriedly cut the doomed beast from its traces. With Baptiste's pistol, he put a bullet through its head. His only thought now was speed, speed—to reach the General while there was still time.

The shot had startled the other animals. He heard the lowing of the beeves, the mules' milling. Then, clear and sharp, came Melissy's call.

"Tom—the Cajun!"

Kinlock hurried up the train. The sight of the Cajun startled him. Louey Pitou straddled his mule, open-mouthed, with his eyes starting.

"What's the trouble?"

Kinlock followed the Cajun's outstretched arm. Then he leaped from his saddle to the wagon box. But the truth was there before his astounded eyes. The Spanish prisoner was gone.

The Cajun was whispering, "Only for one minute, I look away. When you shoot that mule. Then I look back—then Baptiste is gone."

Kinlock examined the rope's remnants. Sliced. Not that fact alone shook him. It was what his mind read in the close-crowding brush that pressed the wagon's far side. From the thickets there an Indian had sprung. He had ridden that concealed side of the wagon—no man could guess how long. Clinging there, waiting like a great cat. The mule's broken leg had given him the chance to act. He had cut those ropes, jerked Joe Baptiste into the thickets.

The first impulse was to pursue. He checked it. The Red Sticks must be very close. In those thickets Death waited, asking only provocation to strike. There was no room now to form a wagon-circle. He dared not leave these traitors while he scouted the thickets. Only one choice remained. He climbed into the saddle, his voice rising.

"Move on—"

A single shot whipped, echoing crisply through the canyon. Kinlock's eardrums shattered with an inhuman shriek. Red Sticks were pouring from the mountainsides. A mule went down, another. The whole train was plunging, men's shouts mingling with shots, and savage war-whoops.

He got the rifle up to his cheek. Then his horse pitched under him, rolling. He groped for the gun. A musket roared almost in his face. Kinlock was driven backward, staggering, blood cascading from his left side. Then something smashed across his head. He fell to one knee. Now he hugged the ground. Darkness was enveloping him. The last sound he heard was Melissy screaming, screaming. . . .

WAVES of pain were his first conscious sensation, throbbing hurt of his head and left arm—spreading in pulsations through his whole body. Confusion blanketed a brain still numbed by shock. When his eyes opened, spinning explosions of light shut them again; the sounds on his ears were the garbled throbs of demoniacal drums. Then oblivion shut down once more.

He awoke on his back, face upturned to a thin, cold drizzle. Pain still held him but now it was an all-over raw soreness and not forks of fire. His head split, aching, but the confusion was gone. Clearly, he knew that under him his wrists were bound, his ankles fastened. Turning he saw Melissy alongside him, also tied, then the Cajun. There was no sight of Lone Tree, the Creek courier.

By a fire stood Red Ax, a prisoner. He was being questioned by a Red Stick—from the two turkey feathers in his hair, a mingo. At his side stood the Spanish contractor. Kinlock's eyes moved on to the warriors beyond the fire, perhaps twenty of them, some blanketed, some naked but for loincloths, squatting by the flame. To one side sat the wagoners and drovers, eating.

Against the wet night the long line of wagons and mules made a glistening silhouette. A dark, massive body with bloodied head lay on the road—perhaps the Krooman slave.

The Red Stick mingo had turned to Baptiste, as if for instructions. With the beaverskin jammed over his ears, the black cloak wrapping his chin, only a yellow smear showed the Spaniard's face.

"Ask him how many soldiers are at Fort Strother," the contractor said.

Kinlock picked out the essentials of Red Ax's answer. It was a carefully calculated lie. Scornfully, Red Ax told them that General Jackson was maintaining a powerful force. He reminded them that the fort lay just ahead, barely beyond the canyon's southern exit. He said that for them to push on would be *skena,* very bad —they would but walk squarely into his Great White Chief's hands. Baptiste heard this warning impatiently. He explained to the mingo that he already knew the Fort lay at the exit of the canyon. What he desired now was other information.

Red Ax did not wait for further questioning. Erect, contemptuous, he added to his captors' difficulties—with another lie.

"Retreat for you is no better," he told the Red Stick. "To turn back, you can only leave this canyon by the north. And there you will run into the swift allies of my Chief even now on their way to join him."

Again his words had effect. The Red Stick as well as the Spaniard, unconsciously shook their heads in agreement—as if this danger was already known to both.

Red Ax said coldly, "So what course remains open to the Yellow Face and the Weasel? Only to flee by foot up the cliffs from whence they came."

Angered, the mingo said, "Perhaps I will teach my red brother to speak more softly."

"What can the Weasel teach a Creek warrior," retorted Red Ax, "when he knows nothing to teach."

However, Baptiste had been only partly impressed by the danger of his situation. Watching, Kinlock could see that he discounted, at least, the fact that reinforcements for Fort Strother were almost on his heels. He spoke to the Red Stick. It was true, he said, that to go forward would only lead them into Jackson's outstretched hands. Flight up the hillsides, he never even considered. They would turn the wagon train back and escape from the canyon by the route it had entered. He told the mingo that Red Ax lied. For all they knew of the truth, the Thirty-ninth Infantry might not yet even have left Fayetteville. He had a plan.

Kinlock watched the preparations. For the moment, he and the other prisoners seemed forgotten. Whether because of the greater urgency for escaping from the canyon, or that they were being held as hostages, he could not guess. A blanketed guard, his back against a tree, rifle in lap, watched them.

The wagoners were roused. As they went to the wagons, the drizzle became a downpour. The fire smoldered soddenly. In the soaking darkness, men and wagons and beasts blended into a confused, meaningless blur of mortal frustration. He heard the dull reports of whips, cursing, the straining fury of teamsters and mules. As he lay there, half-blinded with the rain, the truth came to him. Baptiste would not, tonight, be able to turn the train back on its trail. Darkness, the weather, the unbelievable narrowness of the road, would not permit it. In the morning, perhaps, in daylight it could be effected. Even then there would be no turning around of the wagons. But one course was open to the Spaniard. He must *back* the wagons, yard by yard, out to the canyon's entrance. Pain-gripped though he was, Kinlock grinned dourly.

The Red Sticks' triumph was their own undoing. The narrowness of the canyon had made attack easy. But now it also had betrayed them. Hours would come before they could escape the trap of their own laying.

Melissy's face, a white smear, was turned toward him. He saw her struggle, squirm, as if to bring her body nearer his own. The guard who sat at the tree rose and with his foot shoved her back.

No blood was in Kinlock's face so he reckoned the blow that had smashed his head had been no tomahawk, probably a gun-butt. His musket-wound was in his left armpit. He felt clotted blood there but no lead, and maybe it had only fleshed him.

TWO hours passed before the attempt to turn the train ended. The exhausted wagoners crept beneath the wagons. Baptiste, after a talk with the mingo, climbed to the box where he had but a few hours before been a prisoner. Kinlock saw him there, once more perched, his head withdrawn into the cloak, the arch of his back making him again seem like some waiting bird of ill omen. The Red Sticks, excepting the guard who sat by the tree, fell on the ground like dogs and slept in the rain.

Red Ax had been placed opposite their guard. He sat, arms bound behind him, erect, immovable, like a man carved from rock.

Kinlock's eyes closed, opened. The cold rain had eased his throbbing head, and he must not sleep now. He glued his eyes to the guard who sat at the base of the tree. Once the Indian rose to examine the fire. But the rain baffled even his woodsman's attempts to reawaken it. The best he could do was to lean rock-slabs toward it, partially shield it. He returned to the tree, leaned his back against it. Through the blanket, he gripped the rifle. With a pang, Kinlock saw it was his own.

How long he watched the guard he did not know. The stillness of the Red Stick was matched only by the immobility of Red Ax's figure. The guard's outline blurred, wavered, as Kinlock watched. Once he started, realizing he had dozed.

The still, unmoving body of the guard became exaggerated to his bleared senses. The Indian was like an inanimate thing, rather than a man. How he could sit there, hour after hour, with no stir at all . . . Then Kinlock's heart seemed to hammer. His eyes steadied on the guard.

A dark, widening stain was spreading over the front of the guard's blanket, where his chest would be. Kinlock saw the hands that held the rifle in his lap. Something, deeper-hued than the rain, was dripping on those hands.

Kinlock's eyes turned to Red Ax. He had not moved.

Slowly, almost as if in a gesture of homage, the Red Stick guard's head and shoulders bowed forward, fell on his knees. Then, just for an instant, Kinlock saw that a man stood behind the tree. It was Lone Tree, the Creek courier—he whom Red Ax had called "the messenger of death." He held a dripping knife. He had stabbed the guard in the back.

Kinlock's breath tightened. A stir had sounded from one of the wagons. A teamster thrust his head out, cursed. He stood up and adjusted a tarpaulin. Kinlock watched him. But the man's head did not turn toward the dead guard. Cursing, he disappeared again under the wagon-top.

Silence fell once more, only the rainfall in his ears. Time had no meaning, his straining eyes saw no movement anywhere. Then suddenly Lone Tree was alongside him. Without sign or sound, he bent, rolled Kinlock over, sliced his wrist and ankle bonds. Before Kinlock was on his knee, the Creek had passed on to Melissy, Red Ax. Kinlock's right arm swept her into the shadows with him, stumbling, half-frozen. He saw the Creek bending over the Cajun. Then they were slipping, sliding up the hillside. First streaks of daylight showed now. A determination gripped Kinlock—a mad, fierce inspiration. He shoved Melissy on, crept back to the tree where the dead guard held his rifle, the gift rifle-gun of Old Hickory.

His hand reached from behind the tree, seized the gun-barrel. Then an insane screech split his ears.

It was Satan. The gamecock stood on a tree-limb, wings flapping. He had seen the coming of day, was crowing.

Kinlock raced up the hillside, dragging the gun, clawing at bushes, rocks. And behind now he heard movement, uproar. The cock had aroused the camp.

THE rain's roar blanketed all sound of their climbing, darkness and the boulder-broken face of the mountainside masking their flight. Above was the ridge, but Kinlock kept below it with no intention of outlining their figures against the sky so soon now gray. Beside him, Red Ax suddenly touched his arm, pointed to the south.

"My brother is turned around," he said. "It is the other way where lies his Chief and the Fort."

But Kinlock's mad inspiration had become a desperate plan. He well knew how the Red Sticks would figure. They would throw their searching party ahead, confident that the escaping prisoners would flee toward Fort Strother a few miles away. They never would figure the wild thing he planned to do. Without explanation, Kinlock led the way above, and toward the rear, of the canyon-trapped wagon train.

As if they had been in some shut-off world, they stumbled across the cliff, slipping, falling—storm and darkness blocking all sight or sound of pursuit. Rain beat upon them till wetness no longer had sensation, rock cuts and bruises no more hurt. His wound was but a frozen area under his arm. Breath tore icily from his lungs. Alongside him, Melissy sobbed wrackingly, silently, her emotion audible only in jerked, slurred gasps.

Once Lone Tree slipped past him swiftly, the Cajun following. Then two inky-black silhouettes rose from the rocks —Red Sticks. In the half-darkness, Kinlock saw the Creek move suddenly, plunge his knife in one's neck. The Cajun straddled the other, beating in his head with a rock.

"There's one for my great country," he muttered.

They waited, then, crouched against the cascading cliffs, water jutting over them in streams. But no other pursuers showed, and they moved on, tortured with the physical effort, terrible terrain. Below, and ahead, Kinlock saw the canyon's north end, where the train had entered at sunset. A small smear of gray revealed its mouth.

He went down, bracing Melissy's body against his hip, supporting her with the right hand that held the rifle-gun. The rain was turning from gray, slanting sheets, to brown, and daylight had come. And now as they reached the road and stumbled to the canyon's entrance, his breath was fierce, eager.

Even in the fury of their flight, never had his determination left him. Somehow,

unless death claimed him—he would hold his train. More even than cunning, it was this determination that had made him lead his little band north rather than south. For once the Spaniard had backed the train out of the canyon, it would scatter and be lost beyond all chance of recovery for Andy Jackson.

They hurried toward the exit. It loomed before them now almost like an open door to the valley beyond. Kinlock marveled that even wagons and men and cattle had been able to pass its narrow portals. Immediately on both sides cliffs rose up blankly with scarcely hand or foothold for a man.

In the rain-slashed morning, there was no sign of the regular army reinforcements from Fayetteville. No smoke or fire met his gaze along the road that wound down into the valley. Yet that part of his plan, he realized, had been the wildest. There still remained the part which he, himself, was going to play now.

The Red Sticks had left him shot-pouch, powder-horn. He slid back the trap in the rifle-stock, saw there the grease-patches. But the Red Stick guard had loaded his rifle, and it was not to Kinlock's liking. From the horn, he measured a fresh charge. He selected a ball from the pouch, shoved it and the patch down the barrel with his ramrod. He primed the pan.

Then he chose his position, about fifty feet from the canyon's mouth and somewhat to one side.

Red Ax touched his arm. "We go on now, my brother?"

Kinlock's great head and shoulders turned toward him. "When we first went into that pass," he answered, "the notion struck me. I reckoned one man and a rifle could hold off that whole train if he had to."

His teeth showed mirthlessly.

"Well, there's our train in that canyon now. It can't get out by the south exit. And I ain't going to let it come out this end."

He muttered, "Not while I'm here—and Old Hickory's rifle-gun. Maybe I can hold 'em in there till the soldiers get here. I'm going to try. Melissy, you better pray. Directly, I'll be doing some shooting!"

IV

FLATTENED against the rocks, to one side of the canyon's entrance, they waited. Two hours had passed. Red Ax had gone down the valley, by Kinlock's orders, on the road back to Fayetteville. If Fate willed it, he would meet the Thirty-ninth, hasten its arrival. Melissy he had attempted to send with the Creek. But she refused, standing there in the rain, her face stubborn.

"I don't want to be anywhere but with you, Tom Kinlock," she reminded him. "If you don't get through this, then I don't want to, either," and he urged her no more.

Lone Tree was sharpening his scalping knife on a slab. The Cajun was thoughtfully hefting and sorting rocks in a pile at his feet.

"I am Louey Pitou," he told the Creek who watched him silently and without understanding a word. "I have seen all things, everywhere. I have killed men with gun, pistol, hatchet. *Diable!* Now it is the first time I play duck-on-the-rock with Red Sticks."

The Creek regarded him wonderingly.

"It is fine for to have a country," the Cajun said. "Now that I got me a country—*Diable!* red 'un, I show you. When I fight for my country then I am like my Captain. I am one terrible man."

He followed the Creek to the other side of the canyon's mouth. Kinlock and Melissy were alone. With Lone Tree's knife and the Cajun's rocks, on one side—himself, and the rifle on the other—they would make that narrow exit, literally, a door to hell.

Something stirred in the bushes near them. Melissy climbed higher up the rocks, said quietly, "It's your horse. He must have strayed out here last night, after he fell. He's crippled."

She slipped through the brush, returned with the animal. For an instant, Kinlock had a hope that he could send the Cajun on the horse to search for the army reinforcements. But the animal's heavy limp told him that was impossible.

An hour later he heard the first mutterings, deep within the canyon. His lips set. Baptiste had begun to back up the wagon train. First would come a couple

of Red Stick scouts, then the beeves and drovers, then the wagons. With his body he endeavored to shield the rifle's fire-pan from the rain. His side was beginning to ache now, throbbing. Melissy had torn a strip from her petticoat, bound it. Great as was the pain, he was thankful no bullet was there.

Abruptly, Melissy gasped. But he didn't need her warning. He had seen the Red Stick warrior appear at the canyon's mouth. Kinlock brought up the rifle, drew his bead in the center of the man's forehead. His trigger finger squeezed.

Then an oath burst from his lips. His flint struck only wet powder in the pan.

Screaming the Creek war-cry, Lone Tree had sprung for the Red Stick. His knife flashed twice. The Cajun ran past him, hurling rocks into the face of a second Red Stick. Kinlock hesitated, for the moment baffled, beside himself with fury. Then he flung the useless rifle from him. In a half-dozen strides, he reached his crippled horse. One weapon, he knew, still waited. From the rifle-scabbard at the horse's side protruded his long bull whip, fifteen feet of rawhide rolled around its hickory butt.

He snatched it free, sprang down the rocks. He flicked the whip overhead, uncurling it in a crack like thunder.

A third Red Stick had appeared at the canyon's mouth. As Louey Pitou rose from the one he had killed, the newcomer sprang for him with a brandished hatchet.

Like the swift strike of a giant snake, Kinlock's whip leaped between them. It slashed the Red Stick's face and he screamed. He dropped the hatchet, clutched his eyes. The whip bit again. Blood seeped between his hands. The Red Stick ran blindly, drunkenly—squarely into Lone Tree's waiting knife.

Tom Kinlock had knocked off a snake's head at fifteen paces with his whip. And now he stood there by the canyon's mouth, curling its rawhide length over his head. Beeves pressed from the canyon. And the whip drove like lightning-flashes into them. They halted, backed, turned into the canyon again, piling up. Men's voices shrieked, the beasts bellowed wildly. And over and over Tom Kinlock's whip slashed into them.

He stood in the rain there, a raging giant, with his wound reopened, blood staining his left side. He shouted and cursed, and his right hand flayed into the bodies of men and beasts. In the mouth of that canyon all living things rioted and fell back, with the cattle surging and bellowing and white men scattering and the Red Sticks screaming awesomely that out there was the White Giant whose terrible whip struck with the fury of Aba Inki's right hand.

EFFORT tore the choking breath from him in sobs. His great arm ground in its socket as he swung. A shot tore through his buckskin breeches. But his taunting curses hurled back. He was a bad mark for their fire, drawn as he was against the portal's side. For accurate aim they must emerge into the open. A Red Stick attempted it. He came running, his musket raised. And Kinlock's whip cut him down, sent him rolling, scuttling, screaming for safety in the canyon.

The Red Stick mingo appeared. He walked proudly, with measured strides, arrow and bow ready. He halted, nocked the poisoned arrow—faced Kinlock.

Then Kinlock's whip left its stock, ran through the air and blasted his face. The mingo staggered. And again Lone Tree leaped with his terrible knife—sank it in the Red Stick's body.

Momentarily, the caravan checked. A single beef ran from the canyon, bawling.

Then Lone Tree shrieked the warning. Kinlock turned, saw the reason. From inside the canyon Red Sticks had climbed to the portal's heights, where Kinlock had believed no man could find a foothold. They came down over his head now, crouched in the sheltering rocks.

His whip could not reach them up there where they squirmed like huge rock lizards. They could fire but he could not touch them.

Lone Tree uttered the single sharp Creek war-whoop, sprang for the first rock, began to climb—the dripping knife in his teeth. He was halfway to the summit, when a rifle cracked. He stood slowly erect, leaned backward and fell forty feet.

Opposite Kinlock, the Cajun was hurling rocks like a human catapult, Kinlock's arm swung again, again, numb now—red and black spots stabbing his vision, his

heart dead with exhaustion in his laboring chest. Under him, his legs rocked. The rain blinded him. And he knew that now he struck the last blows for his wagon train. But he would strike for it till he dropped. A bullet plucked a lock from his hair. He saw three Red Sticks sliding from the rocks, and beeves were beginning to pour from the canyon's mouth now. He felt his senses slipping.

He roused himself, his body rigid, only instinct telling him that he was still swinging the whip, still finding red flesh to sear and slash. He stumbled, rose—braced his legs wide. He lashed out, struggled to bring up the big whip. And then words of fire seemed to burn through his brain rather than on his ears. He sensed their meaning, almost without hearing them. They beat on his consciousness like the wild and terrible joy of great war-drums.

Melissy's words that were telling him: "They've come! Here's the army! Tom —the guns!"

Even the sharp explosion of rifles, the abrupt boom of a six-pounder, meant no more to him than those words. He sank on one knee. The mud flew up, met his face. His right hand flung out, gripping his great whip—frayed, bloodied, at last still.

THAT night Tom Kinlock's wagon train rumbled into Fort Strother with Red Stick prisoners, wagoners and drovers under guard and five thousand Thirty-ninth United States Infantry. Melissy had endeavored to make him lie in one of the wagons, but he turned deaf ears to her pleas. After an army surgeon dressed his arm, he had eaten. With his own hand he poured the drink of rum for Red Ax, who had found the army reinforcements moving, not in the valley, but parallel with the north side of the Raccoons—and speeded their arrival.

Kinlock had put Melissy in the foremost wagon, climbed into the saddle of the wheeler mule, cracked his whip, and they moved on.

They found Andy Jackson standing with his body draped across a low-hanging tree limb. Seeing him there, thin, bony, his cheeks sunken but his eyes still burning with battle-lust, Tom Kinlock understood finally why he was called Old Hickory. Dysentery had racked him, he had eaten nothing but a few grains of parched corn for four days, only sipping the brandy that was keeping him alive, but now his welcome vibrated through the fort.

"By the Eternal," he told them, "we'll win yet. Feed my men and then get some sleep. We're going to smash Weatherford in the morning."

He shook Kinlock's hand, before them all—Fayettevillers and the rest. "Tom," he said, "you got my wagons through. Looking at you, I know what it cost. But that don't matter now. You come through. By hell, I vowed you'd do it. I told 'em I had to have Tom Kinlock in this army!"

Kinlock flushed with pride, but even now in his moment of triumph, he was not yet wholly at peace. When the soldiers had attacked and routed the Red Sticks, amongst those who had escaped was Joe Baptiste. Now, more than ever, could Kinlock wish that he had killed the Spaniard in cold blood. Yet, he knew it could not have been done that way, even though the man's life menaced him. For in his mind Baptiste seemed to possess some deathless evil power. And the man who could escape from those ropes that would have held a mountain bear was capable of doing him great harm. The frontier was composed of many elements, dangers, and it galled Tom Kinlock, almost with a superstitious dread, to know that this man lived and could name him to Fayetteville's marshal as the man who had killed his brother. A thousand times had he wished he had confessed the circumstances of the wagoner's killing.

At dawn Jackson attacked the Red Stick stronghold at the Horseshoe Bend of the Tallapoosa River. Eight hundred of Weatherford's warriors waited, staking everything on the coming battle.

The Americans surrounded the Horseshoe, furrowed with gullies and rough with small growths of timber. Coffee's scouts had gone ahead, attacking the village's rear to capture canoes which the Indians had prepared for escape. Shortly after ten o'clock Old Hickory's six-pounders spoke through the winter-bare woodland. But the cannon were ineffectual, their balls merely burying in the pine-log barricades —and now Red Stick fire was holding the cannoneers low to the ground.

At noon the drums of the Thirty-ninth began to beat the long roll. And Tom Kinlock was ready in the front line. With a silver dollar in his pocket, he had driven clear from Cumberland Gap to fight with Andy Jackson. And now the time had come. His lips were set grimly, as alongside him Louey Pitou spoke.

"*Mon* dieu, we strike now for our country," the little Cajun said, cuddling his rifle. His eyes were gleaming. Then they were racing for the barricades.

A major was first on the works, fell back in the arms of his comrades. Everywhere men in the blue and brass of the Thirty-ninth were scaling the logs. Red Stick prophets, in feathers from head to foot, moved amongst their warriors chanting. Kinlock went over the wall, the Cajun behind him. His rifle blasted in a Red Stick's face, and he did not stop to reload but jerked the hatchet from his belt. The barricades trembled with men locked in death-struggle, arrows, spears and knives flashing—then the Indians broke. And from tree to gully, the Americans hunted them down. When the warriors fled to a cabin at the bottom of a ravine, it was fired and they were slaughtered as they ran out. In mid-afternoon rain fell, and it was all over. Andy Jackson stood on a scene of bloody carnage, and he had won the southeastern frontier.

Kinlock and the Cajun had followed the example of others—skirting the encampment's edges, cleaning up Red Stick skulkers as they went. Now they had reached a hut, and Louey Pitou ducked in. No window or light showed in its depths and Kinlock called a warning—but the Cajun plunged ahead.

Kinlock heard the shot, inside. Then the Cajun came out, slowly step by step . . . moving backward. He turned, white-faced, wide eyes fixed on Tom Kinlock. Then he sank to the ground, blood seeping through his lips.

ACROSS the little man's body, Kinlock saw the movement of a shadowy figure in the cabin. It approached him stealthily, and at sight of it hatred shook him. For it was Joe Baptiste, the beaverskin hat low on his yellow face, his reptile eyes darting at Kinlock over two pistols.

Only one of those pistols was loaded now, and as the Spaniard fired, Kinlock plunged sidewise. Joe Baptiste had missed and he knew it—and now both of his guns were empty. He dropped them and fled back into the cabin's pitchy-darkness.

Kinlock stood there, an instant, fingering his knife. Then he laughed harshly, tossed the knife away. It came to him that this was the judgment of Providence. Barehanded, he strode into that dark interior, and in its blind corners he sought Baptiste as he would have sought a rat. Then he found him, his great hand clutching the yellow throat. He held him in his iron-grasp, till he wilted—then tossed him aside.

Kinlock emerged into daylight, sweat dripping from him. In his arms he carried the Cajun's dead body. The little man who had had no country had died for his country now.

"I want a flag for him, Gen'l," he said, and told Louey Pitou's story.

"By hell," said Andy Jackson, "we'll bury him in a flag and give him a salvo, too."

Tom Kinlock stood there and took a breath. And he thought of Melissy, waiting back at Fort Strother for him. She had found Satan in one of the wagons. It would be fine to be sitting with her while he fed the gamecock corn from his hand. They had come a long way on this frontier, but as he raised his head he knew that now, even with the Red Sticks defeated and Weatherford in full flight, the end was not yet. The settlers in the stockades could leave now, the cabins of the Mississippi Territory be rebuilt, fields resown. But as he gazed at his leader, he realized that Andy Jackson's army had just begun to march.

For now Louey Pitou's words came back to Tom Kinlock. He could not help but smile as he remembered that little man who had known Andy Jackson's secret and mighty plan to drive the Spaniards from Mobile and Pensacola. The blood pounded in Tom Kinlock's veins, his eyes shone as Old Hickory spoke.

Andy Jackson was replying to an officer's question. "Now what?" he repeated, then his voice boomed out. "On to the Gulf!"

Any old-timers wishing to yarn about their early experiences will always be welcome to the Trading Post. In fact, FRONTIER offers $10.00 to the mossy-horn who spins the most exciting, smokiest, yet authentic tale of early days. Each issue will print one or more of these reminiscences, but only the best will collect. Dig down into the war-bags of your memory and give us a tale of the great old days. Mail your stories to THE TRADING POST, care of FRONTIER STORIES.

THE EDITOR.

The End of the Benders

By Mrs. LULU O. CREWDSON

I READ the story of the Bender family in your Summer, 1941, issue. The author of the narrative mentioned the fact that he did not know of a surety where the Bender family disappeared to.

Years after their disappearance, an account in regard to them appeared in the newspaper, I believe it was the "St. Louis Republic," which I remember my mother relating.

It seemed two men who knew of so many people never being seen after entering the Bender House decided to take steps to investigate on their own hook. They went horseback, arrived at the Bender Home and found the family in question had absconded. The horsemen followed in haste. After some hours travel they spied them far ahead. The two men gave chase. The Benders were traveling by wagon and when they realized they were being pursued laid whip to their team.

They were overtaken by the horsemen after they had shot the Bender horses, then a hand to hand battle ensued. The Benders fought furiously as long as life was in their bodies. Kate, the daughter, was the last to die. She fought like a tigress. When asked if she did any of the killing and if so—why, she said "Yes" —that she liked to see the blood run. The horsemen buried the horses and dead bodies and pledged to each other they would never reveal their secret. The last of the two men to die felt he should reveal the secret of the disappearance of the murderous band.

He related it to friends as he lay on his deathbed. He said his friend had long since been dead and he would soon be laid in his last resting place so it was fitting he should give his secret to the world.

I thought it only right to pass the final act of the case on to you so as to close it to the satisfaction of your readers. It would make a very good subject for Hollywood Picture Producers to show justice always catches up with evil-doers.

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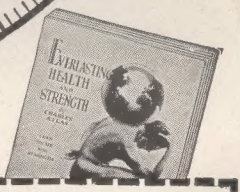

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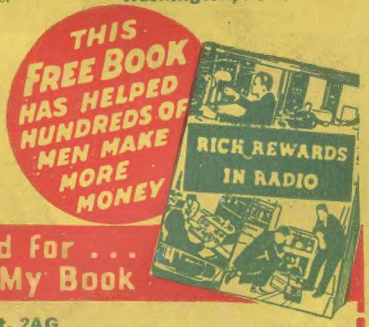

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